4.6 "Mir gesinn eis dono op *facebook*" – (Self-)Stagings of Luxembourg Teenagers in Social Media as Virtual Identity Constructions

Luc Belling

The topic of this case study are identity constructions by Luxembourg teenagers in the social network *facebook*. I will examine how teenagers stage themselves on this virtual platform. Nowadays, digital media exert a strong influence on young people, with parents playing a less crucial role than friends (see Boyd 2006). As a result, certain peer dynamics evolve on virtual platforms such as *facebook* where we can observe self-stagings and identity constructions.

The contribution examines such identity-generating self-stagings in the context of digital social networks. This means transferring theoretical concepts of identity construction that relate to non-virtual identities and face-to-face situations into a digitalized space with self-generated online identities. The term of online identity can be compared to Döring's definition of virtual identities (2000: 65): "We refer to virtual identities when we examine how people present themselves when communicating computer-based with each other."[65] One should however be careful not to generalize computer-based communication, since the users in social networks, in contrast to web forums and chats, do not conceal themselves behind pseudonyms but rather represent a virtual image under their proper name – after all, the idea is to be recognized and acknowledged. These virtual identities exist only within digital social networks (in this case *facebook*), described by Boyd/Ellison (2007: 211) as follows:

> "We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (i) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system."[66]

The definition also refers to interstitial characteristics of social networks such as creating a personal profile in a 'semi-public' environment, whereas the interactional orientation of social networks is disregarded in the context of this contribution. Creating a profile basically constitutes only the access to a social network, with no particular focus on the communicative possibilities of these platforms.

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65 | Personal translation of: "Wir sprechen von virtuellen Identitäten, wenn es darum geht, wie Menschen sich selbst präsentieren, wenn sie computervermittelt [...] miteinander kommunizieren."

66 | Smith (1976) has made similar observations. He distinguishes between object *versus* acting self.

This case study's two aspects of examination imply the following research questions:

- Which techniques of self-representation are used in online profiles of teenagers?
- Which role does the wall play as a contact zone in self-staging?

One theoretical approach dealing with identities in the context of social media is symbolic interactionism. Already Mead (1934) pointed to the crucial step in the forming of an individual's identity that consists of self-reflection (view of one's identity from an exterior perspective) and the perception of reactions of society (in this case the self-constructed network contacts in *facebook* that form a kind of community). In social networks, this objectivation is particularly evident during the creation of online profiles. Here, considerations concerning the manner one wants to present oneself to one's own community (see Döring 2003: 334) become apparent.

For capturing the dimension of self-reflection/reflexivity, we draw on a contrasting staging method described by Anthony Giddens (1984) in his model of presence/absence. He developed the conceptual pair of front and back regions, with the front region expressing a display or performance and the back region a concealment (see Werlen 1997: 174). Frontal aspects of presentation cannot be authentic because they represent a facade; only what is concealed behind it, the back presentation, should be considered real/authentic (see Giddens 1984: 124). These two staging techniques will be examined in the context of virtual identities in order to show the relationship between frontal and back stagings and the communicative content conveyed.

Goffman's self-representation in everyday life (impression management) partly draws on symbolic interactionism which states that communicative actions are crucial for identity formation (see Goffman 1959: 3). Complementing the analysis of interaction-based, communicative actions with that of other forms of making contact is indispensable for this contribution. In the virtual social networks, communicative actions can be detected on the walls with both profile owners as well as their 'contacts' (i.e. the members of their network) leaving messages and also being able to comment on these visibly for everyone.

Given this communally constructed self-image on *facebook*, the study seeks to shed light on two specific perspectives of analysis, since virtual identities feed on self-generated profile pages as well as on interactional walls. These two self-staging techniques are examined in the context of virtual space which constitutes an interstice of private and public environment. According to Boyd (2006) these are "places where youth gather to hang out amongst friends and make public [...] spaces their own." Although the virtual identities are visible by many other users, they represent for teenagers a private space where they can interact with friends without supervision such as by parents or teachers.

The first research topic examines the hybrid construction of personal profile pages as an interplay of front and back staging techniques. The second research topic highlights the wall as a contact zone that enables situations of private communication in a public space.

The data for the case study was gathered from examining online identities of six Luxembourg teenagers from one school class. The project was presented in an 11th grade and three male and three female participants[67] were determined by random selection among the volunteers. All wall messages posted by these six participants from July to December 2012 were gathered and analysed. Besides monitoring the wall activities, I recorded the information on the profile page and noted any changes made to the profiles during these six months.[68] In order to influence the data as little as possible, the results were not presented to the school class until the project's conclusion in January 2013.

After evaluating and analysing the walls, semi-structured interviews were conducted that related to the teenagers' communication practices. By linking the quantitative evaluations of the online profiles with qualitative evaluations of the interviews, the case study also provides, besides the statistical evaluation, insight into the teenagers' user motives.

4.6.1 Practices of (Self-)Staging in Online Profiles

For examining self-staging techniques in online profiles I draw on a modified concept by Zhao *et al.* (2008) for identity construction on *facebook* which is subdivided into four categories: visual (profile photo), enumerative (interests, hobbies, favorite books etc.), narrative (self generated texts by the users about themselves) and self-labelling (information about gender, relational status, home town, education etc.) The model reflects a continuum of public presentation that is arranged between implicit and explicit. The practice of self-labelling is for instance a very explicit method of self-staging,

"[...] since individuals choose labels to describe themselves, thereby straightforwardly and unambiguously placing themselves in categories, [...] enumeration of hobbies and interests, on the other hand, is a less explicit form of identity construction, since there is a less straightforward connection between statements about one's hobbies and interests

67 | In general, however, the analysis revealed no significant differences between the sexes, which is why the further discussion will not include differentiation by gender.

68 | Changes in profile information are displayed on the wall and could therefore be considered in the analysis. In the case of the participants the changes related exclusively to the publication of a new profile photo. Only the group memberships and the quantity of Likes increased continuously during the period under review. The information in Table 2 refer to the last day of monitoring (31.12.2013). The remaining information did not vary during the six months.

[...], and the type of identity one constructs for oneself through such a claim" (Bolander/Locher 2010: 166).

The visual practice of uploading profile photos represents the most implicit form of self-staging, since contents are only shown, but not described or explained (see Zhao *et al.* 2008: 1816).

Table 1 lists the information published by teenagers in their online profiles.

Form of public staging	**Staging practices**	Melanie	Sam	Sophie	Raoul	Manon	Marc
Implicit	Visual	23	18	8	11	7	13
	Enumerative	504	257	33	150	86	394
	Narrative	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Explicit	Self-labelling	5	8	5	8	7	7
	Network contacts	1,506	1,352	1,107	481	738	683

Table 1: Staging practices of the reviewed teenagers on their profile pages (quantitative count) (own study) [69]

The first research question discusses the self-representation practices of teenagers on their profile pages. The self-reflection/reflexivity described by Mead (1934) and the inherent exclusion of certain information is an important process in the staging of virtual identity. The investigation analyses the interstitial character of the profile pages on which the users convey authenticity through the reproduction of selected private information (back), but at the same time consciously stage themselves (front) in order to stand out among the mass of network contacts.

Visual self-staging: The category of visual presentation techniques constitutes, through the regular updating of profile photos, a continuous working on identity. In this immaterial 2.0 work (Coté/Pybus 2011) the profile pages appear not as static elements but as consciously employed tools to attract the attention of network contacts. Profile photos constitute an implicit method of presenting oneself on platforms such as *facebook* without using textual explanations.

69 | The test subjects' names were changed for reasons of privacy. Only the gender of the user is expressed with the chosen name.

The analysis of the photos revealed that the test subjects were indeed visible on each of the 80 uploaded pictures, but often not alone. On 34 pictures (42 %) the teenagers appeared together with another person or group. Manon's comment was: "Mostly I upload pictures together with my boyfriend. I want everyone to see we're a couple."[70] Besides partly very private representations of relationships, group pictures with friends are a particularly favorite motif. The teenagers also confirm that they post pictures with their friends to demonstrate their closeness with these persons.

In general, regular updates of profile photos are an important presentation method of virtual reality, with the pictures partly conveying a very private and authentic impression of the teenagers, apparently without too much concern about their reception within the network's extensive realm.

Enumerating self-staging: So-called enumerating profile information (books, films, music, places visited, *facebook* groups etc.) are extensively used by the teenagers (see Table 1). They inform about selected interests and preferences which again point to a dynamic staging of identity. Regular information about places visited or films watched allow a continuously updated glimpse into the teenagers' non-virtual life. The enumerating self-staging presents the audience with information that deviates from the usual standardized profile information. This is also confirmed by Melanie who, with 504 enumerations of interests, conveyed the most information:

"I click on everything that interests me in some way or that I like. Since meanwhile all kinds of things can be found on *facebook*, it's easy to quickly *like* something. I don't really worry that the other contacts can see this information. After all, they're unimportant things that don't reveal much about me."[71]

The carefree way in which Melanie provides her information confirms that implicit presentation methods (pictures and enumeration) tend to be back stagings that do not seek public display. These more spontaneous techniques of self-presentation form a contrast to the narrative staging.

Narrative Self-staging: "Oh no, that's too much work writing about myself. And I don't really know what to write."[72] This comment by Raoul is representative for all test subjects (except Sam). The effort in terms of time seems to play a role in the

70 | Personal translation of: "Meeschtens lueden ech Fotoen héich op deenen ech mat mengem Frënd sinn. Ech wëll, datt jidderee gesäit, datt mir eng Koppel sinn."

71 | Personal translation of: "Alles, wat mech interesséiert oder mir gefält, klicken ech un. Mëttlerweil fënnt een alles op *facebook* an et kann een et séier an ouni Problemer *liken*. Ech denken am Fong net driwwer no, datt déi aner Leit déi Saache kënne gesinn. Et si jo nëmmen onwichteg Saachen, déi näischt mat mir ze dinn hunn."

72 | Personal translation of: "Oh nee, dat ass mir zevill Aarbecht, fir eppes iwwert mech ze schreiwen. Ech wéisst och guer net, wat ech do schreiwe sollt."

creation of a profile. Raoul also adds that without the categories pre-set by *facebook* it is difficult to present oneself. Sam is the only test subject who uses this narrative self-staging method, even though paradoxically his text underscores the difficulty of the self-image: "You want to know something about me? Ask the others. They always know everything better anyway." Asked about it, Sam was unable to explain why he had chosen precisely this phrasing in his profile.

Due to a lack of profile information, an analysis of this self-staging method could not be carried out, maybe – a possible interpretation of Sam's example – because the self-representation here is so explicit that it has a paralyzing effect. But in how far the test subjects are aware of an audience cannot be determined. The fourth category is perhaps the most classic category within online profiles, but it also shows the greatest differences between the test subjects' self-stagings.

Self-labelling self-staging: The explicit profile information comprises the name (obligatory), date of birth, relationship status, family members, language skills, gender, hometown and education (school). Already with the obligatory labelling with a name, we can observe various techniques of self-staging since three teenagers give their official name, the three others a slight variation of their offical name or a nickname, by which they are, however, known in their peer group and thus recognizable. Raoul, whose profile gives his real name, comments: "That's not at all relevant for me. I want other people to be able to find me. How are they supposed to do that if I give a false user name?"[73] Raoul's comment corresponds to the basic idea of *facebook*: to serve as a platform on which people can find other people they know. By contrast, three teenagers used an artificial name which is not really a classic pseudonym but rather a typographical-phonetic play with their own name. Manon for instance uses letter reiterations in her name ("Maaaannnooonnn"); Melanie only uses her first name which she however divides with a space into a first and second name ("Mel Anie") and Sam chooses besides his correctly given first name an imaginary second name ("Miseler") which points to his home region (Moselle region). This creates a certain charaterization of the person, but at the same time makes finding it via *facebook*'s search function difficult. Asked about this Sam said: "I don't want everybody to know my name. That's too private for me. My friends know my pseudonym and know how to find me on *facebook*."[74] Stating one's name can therefore very well be regarded as part of one's private sphere which – in this for the test subjects public space – is protected with an artificial name (front facade). Indirectly Sam indicates that the potential for networking with other network contacts is not that important to him. These results confirm Boyd and Ellison's (2007: 211) statement about the change in the notion of networking:

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73 | Personal translation of: "Dat ass jo guer net relevant fir mech. Ech wëll, datt déi aner Leit mech op *facebook* fanne kënnen. Wéi solle se dat da maachen, wann ech e falsche *Username* hunn?"

74 | Personal translation of: "Ech wëll net, datt jidderee weess, wéi ech heeschen. Dat ass mir ze privat. Meng Frënn kenne mäi *facebook*-Numm, mat deem se mech fanne kënnen."

"On many of the large SNSs [social network sites], participants are not necessarily 'networking' or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network."

Besides the name, the listing of family members is an interesting feature of self-representation with the teenagers. With the exception of Sophie's profile, all other profiles named referred to friends as family and pointed via a link to their *facebook* profile. Here the test subjects agree in the interviews, as Manon explains: "That's perfectly normal at school. It's become a trend. My best friends are like family to me."[75] On the one hand, the use of this profile category shows the strong attachment of the teenagers among each other (already indicated by the profile pictures), but on the other, it can also be seen as evidence that naming the actual family members might be too private or that these do not have a *facebook* profile.[76]

The analysis shows a clear combination of implicit back and explicit front stagings. Authentic (back) information is made public with the implicit presentation techniques of contents which the teenagers do not perceive as primary identity markers. By contrast, in the case of the self-labelling profile category the teenagers partly erected a front facade because they regard the communication contents as too private to share with a larger audience. This process of self-reflection therefore occurs in explicit profile categories in which the public display of non-virtual realities is avoided.

4.6.2 Identity Constructions on *facebook* Walls

The data listed in Table 2 was gathered and evaluated to answer the second research question relating to wall activities.

For the quantitative counts, one can already observe significant differences in the number of published posts as well as in the type of these posts (textual status messages *versus* photos). These figures suggest different self-staging techniques on the wall. In addition, besides the active self-stagings, we can also notice discrepancies between the reception of posts through one's own network and the resulting interaction.

The posts were gathered with the help of an egocentric network analysis that exclusively examines the communication on the test subjects' wall – without

75 | Personal translation of: "Dat ass ganz normal bei eis. Et ass en Trend ginn. Meng bescht Frënn si wéi eng Famill fir mech."

76 | Also regarding other information from the self-labelling profile category were frontal stagings employed for privacy reasons. None of the test subjects gave their actual date of birth and also for 'hometown' Hawaii or Los Angeles was given, but never a place in Luxembourg. Similarly, for 'education' no profile listed the actual school but, in turn, schools on different continents.

looking at their activitites on other walls – in order to record the teenagers' communication processes.

	Melanie	Sam	Sophie	Raoul	Manon	Marc
Posted messages	263	74	56	85	26	194
of these status updates	102	38	24	50	7	57
of these photos	77	27	14	29	17	44
Messages from other users	640	35	267	154	229	123
Comments on messages	2,808	256	583	845	495	2,675
Number of *Likes* received	5,048	562	1,221	1,051	688	1,308

Table 2: Counted wall activities of interviewed teenagers (own study) [77]

On the walls the teenagers communicate daily with their network and draw attention to themselves with updates. The investigation will show whether Bolander/Locher's (2010: 167) hypothesis is confirmed that "implicit means of identity construction is clearly different to the explicit form evident in the self-labelling on the profile pages." This would mean that on walls private information that was protected in the profiles with non-authentic, frontal displays is made accessible to the same audience and discussed quasi publicly.

Functionality of Wall Posts

Table 2 shows the number of published information that varies between 263 (Melanie) and 26 (Manon) wall posts. This wide range suggests that the wall is used in different ways. Melanie comments on her high frequency of messages: "I know I publish a lot. I don't do it consciously. I just have a lot to say, or a photo that

77 | The sum of the status messages and photos does not equal the total sum of published entries. In addition, also other forms such as videos, best results in online games etc. were published. This information was, however, not considered in the analysis.

I want to show others."[78] Melanie describes her continuous staging as a means of staying in contact with her network friends and regularly sharing information from her life with them. Manon, by contrast, sees writing short messages more of a problem: "I almost never write statuses. If I want to share something I do it with pictures."[79] She points to the use of pictures as staging measures that show her mostly together with friends. Overall, the analysis shows that the status messages comprise 40 % and the photographs 30 %.

The contents of textual posts chiefly deal with personal topics such as friendships, relationships or school. Bolander/Locher's hypothesis is confirmed here, because the teenagers do indeed discuss private and authentic topics on the walls and therefore act out a back staging infront of an audience. The combination of explicit frontal staging of the profile pages corresponds to an explicit back representation on the walls.

Asked about this, Raoul emphasizes that he fails to see a connection between the two elements: "The profile can be viewed by anyone. But what happens on the wall is for my real friends."[80] Even though virtual reality feeds from these two categories and both are visible for the members of the network, we can observe that the teenagers are conscious of a separation that subdivides the hybrid profile into a public and a private component.

The network analysis of the walls shows that the teenagers on average made contact with 41 different people on their wall.[81] Even though this figure seems relatively high, it constitutes in terms of contacts in the test subjects' networks (481 to 1,506) only a small percentage of possible interlocutors. What can result from this conversational situation, perceived as familiar and involving mostly the same contacts, is the communicative effect that one forgets the invisible third party – in the shape of the audience reading passively along – and conducts private, mostly dyadic conversations in a quasi-public space.

The wall seems to be a private representation platform for teenagers with a direct correlation between the walls, the profile pages and the non-virtual life. The interlocutors on the walls overlap with the teenagers' profile information regarding their family members. When asked in the interview, it was furthermore confirmed that the contacts on the wall were the closest friends, mostly from school, whom they

78 | Personal translation of: "Ech weess, datt ech vill *online* setzen. Ech maachen dat net express. Ech hunn einfach ëmmer eppes ze soen oder eng Foto, déi ech deenen anere weise wëll."

79 | Personal translation of: "Ech schreiwe bal ni Statussen. Wann ech eppes matdeele wëll, da maachen ech dat mat Fotoen."

80 | Personal translation of: "D'Profil gesäit jo jiddereen. Wat awer op der Pinnwand geschriwwe gëtt, dat ass just fir meng Kollegen."

81 | Melanie had the most contacts (59) and Manon the fewest (27). The study disregarded birthday messages. On birthdays, many contacts post a message out of politeness, even though they maintain no online contact with that person.

also meet almost on a daily basis. The wall connections are used by the teenagers as a supplement to the offline world, whereby maintaining relations has an important function in connection with virtual identitities. Bolander/Locher (2010: 165) state that "individuals in *facebook* tend to have 'anchored relationships' (see Zhao *et al.*), which means their *facebook* relationships are grounded in offline life".

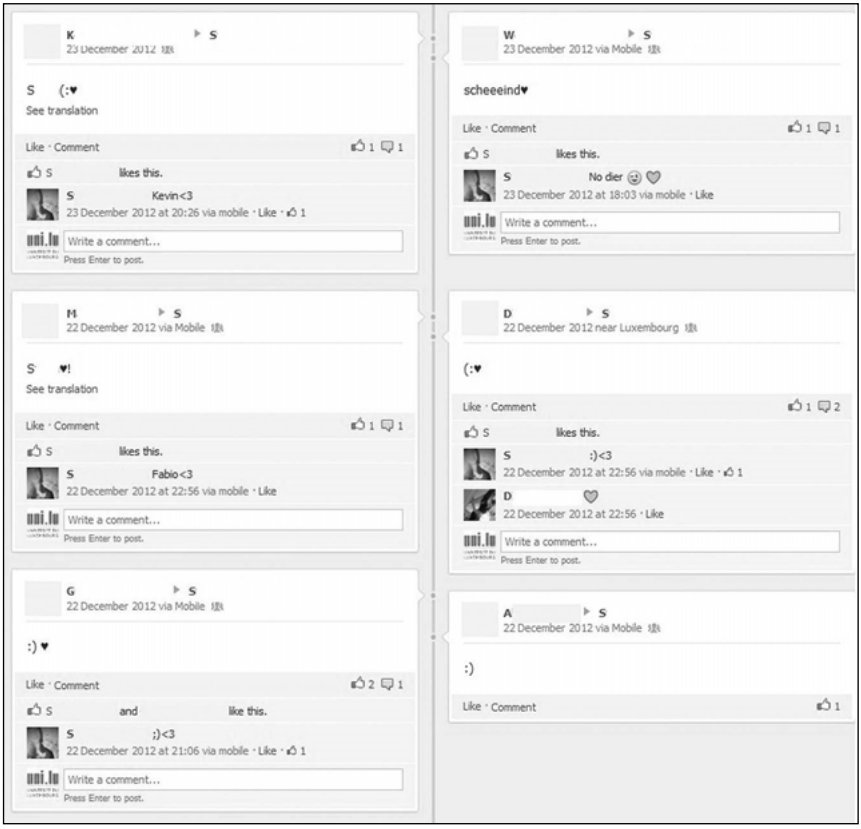

Figure 1: Maintaining relationships through wall posts: Sophie's facebook wall

In my view, this form of short messages (by the profile owner but primarily by the other network contacts) on walls develops a certain "mutual impingement" (see Goffman 1959: 100). Thus messages need not necessarily contain a specific content, but rather act as routine greeting rituals that leave a visitor's trace which in turn leads to a repayment of the visit on other walls. Boyd (2006) also points to the interrelationship of mutual wall messages: "For those seeking attention, writing comments and being visible on popular people's pages is very important and this can be a motivation to comment on others' profiles" (Boyd 2006). This is confirmed by Melanie's comment: "It's exciting when you log into *facebook*. You never know whether someone has posted something on your page. It's always nice when you have other people thinking of

you."[82] This also explains the wall activitities like the one in Fig. 1 which depicts an anonymized screenshot of Sophie's wall (recognizable by the *S*).

A first glance at Fig. 1 underscores the secondary importance of the message content and reinforces the hypothesis that the wall comments, which are chiefly comprised of emoticons, are used for relationship maintenance. What is remarkable in sustaining and developing the virtual identity is not only the attention that is accorded to the teenagers with these comments; also the role that the profile owners themselves fulfill is of crucial importance.

Common Identity Constructions in the Contact Zone (Wall)

One single comment on the wall is not sufficient for relationship maintenance. The profile owner is indirectly called on by the fleeting traces left by the visitor to react to the comment (even if only with an emoticon) as this could otherwise be construed as a lack of respect (see Goffman 2008: 5).

In theatrical performances there is a relationship between actors and audience, described by Goffman as a "performance team" (1959: 71). Communication in social networks, however, has the effect that every user equally fulfills both the role of the actor and that of the spectator and at any moment can leave the passive role of the observer and actively join in the conversation. In this context, Davis and Harre (1990: 46) introduce the notion of acts of positioning, as "the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines".

Accordingly Sophie reacted to all comments, both with a comment of her own and by using the *Like* function (as a rapid response option). For maintaining and managing one's virtual identity this phatic function can be of great importance as a response signal. Gerlitz (2011: 103) points to the significance of the *Like* button which "enables to not only materialize but also measure and record positive affects."[83]

All in all, more than 85 % (n= 7,662) of all wall postings (both textual messages and pictures) were commented on in the corpus, and almost 95 % (n= 9,878) of all comments were marked with at least one *Like*. So it is not suprising to hear Melanie state in the interview: "I try to answer every message on my wall. It's exciting when several conversations start up on different walls."[84] The teenagers considered this time-intensive identity editing work to take up between two to three hours a day, with some stating that it could take even longer depending on how many wall conversations they are having at the same time.

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82 | Personal translation of: "Et ass spannend, wann ee sech bei *facebook* aloggt. Du weess ni, ob een dir op deng Säit geschriwwen huet. Et ass ëmmer schéin ze gesinn, wann anerer un dech geduecht hunn."

83 | Personal translation of: "[...] ermöglicht, positive Affekte mit einem Klick sowohl zu materialisieren als auch zu messen und erfassen."

84 | Personal translation of: "Ech probéieren, op all Message op der Pinnwand ze äntweren. Et ass spannend, wa verschidde Gespréicher op méi Pinnwänn entstinn."

4.6.3 Conclusion

This case study attempted to shed some light on the construction of virtual identities in teenagers, focussing on the hybrid self-staging practices of teenagers as well as the interstitial space of online profiles.

For the profile page, it was possible to show with front and back self-staging techniques that the test subjects are aware of the presence of a public audience and accordingly protect private topics with a facade. We were also able to observe different weightings within the profile categories, with the implicit rubrics being answered most truthfully. A conspicuous profile feature probably typical for teenagers is the inclusion of friends. This was evident both in the profile photos as well as in the labelling of friends as 'family'. This reference to prominent contacts in the network can also be found in the walls of the virtual identity projections. Teenagers seem to attach much more importance to the virtual relationship maintenance with their best friends than self-staging via their online profile.

With the help of an egocentric network analysis it was possible to shed light on this hybrid status of a space in a basically public arena but perceived as private among friends. Despite large personal networks, the number of communication partners is relatively small, which produces a familiar and perhaps also less reflected self-representation in the form of partly very private conversations among the teenagers. This is also evident in the reversal of front and back staging methods, since authentic information is displayed on the wall without a protective facade. In conclusion, the active relationship maintenance of offline contacts turns out to be an important function of virtual identitities which every day demands and stimulates a great number of conversations.

4.7 Petrol Stations as In-Between Spaces I: Practices and Narratives

Sonja Kmec

In *Blumme vun der Tankstell* (2011) ("Flowers from the Petrol Station"), the Luxembourgish singer-songwriter Serge Tonnar gives voice to the ambivalent feelings many people have about petrol stations, which have "often become a code, a mundane place and at the same time a modern myth" (Polster 1996: 11).[85] In the song, Sunday marital quarrels are repeatedly appeased by flowers bought at a petrol station, until one day the speaker's wife does not forgive him and stabs him in the chest. The lyrics encode a diffuse, but pervasive feeling that buying

85 | The present study has been developed together with Agnès Prüm, whose contribution in this volume centers on the encoding of (petrol-station) experiences into films and other media.