An Evocative Auto-Ethnographic study: The Online Disinhibition Effect in regard to Online Dating and Social Media

Being a dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of BA (Hons) Sociology and Anthropology with Gender Studies

May 2019

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"On the whole, auto-ethnographers don't want you to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel care and intrigue" (Ellis, 1996)

“It is evident that this progression of online communication has placed users squarely in a moment where catfishing is and only could be possible.” (Kottemann, 2015)
Abstract

When I was around 12 years old, I was catfished by a friend. She didn’t only create one fake identity, it was five; all with different personalities and motivations. This experience is what initially made me question why anyone would create a fake profile.

Online communication has changed the ways we interact with one another, the rise of both online dating and social media and given rise to the online disinhibition effect (Casale, 2015). The online disinhibition effect looks into five factors which create an environment in which individuals feel disinhibited and dissociated with reality (Suler, 2005). This dissociate and disinhibition has given way to a rise in individuals luring others into relationships by means of false online personas, otherwise known as ‘catfishing’ (Smith, 2017). Through an autoethnographic lens and unstructured interviews with individuals who have been catfished themselves, this research will aim to draw upon Suler’s five factors of the online disinhibition effect to establish an understanding of why people are deceiving one another online to such a huge extent. Ultimately it will aim to tell the stories of people who have been lied and deceived to, revealing the harsh realities and emotions behind such toxic disinhibition and inviting subsequent research to engage and synthesise concepts to how the rise for social media and online dating has led to this point.
Contents

Chapter 1 - Introduction 7-9

1.1 Introduction
1.2 Online disinhibition effect
1.3 Types of Catfishing
1.4 Summary

Chapter 2 - Methodology and Ethics 10-17

2.1 The Research Strategy
2.2 Sampling
2.3 Methodology: Autoethnography
2.4 Autoethnography: Ethics
2.5 Methodology: Interviews
2.6 Interviews: Ethics
2.7 Methodology: Online Survey
2.8 Online Survey: Ethics
2.9 Data collection
2.10 Summary

Prologue 18

Chapter 3 - [New Friends] Social Media 19-21

3.1 Dissociative Anonymity

(A) Autobiography

(B) Interviews
Chapter 4 - [Crushin’] Online Dating

4.1 Asynchronicity

(A) Autobiography

(B) Interviews

(C) Literature Analysis

(D) Interviews

(E) Literature Analysis

4.2 Invisibility

(A) Autobiography

(B) Interviews

(C) Literature Analysis

Chapter 5 - [Car Crash] Online Disinhibition Effect

5.1 Disassociate Imagination

(A) Autobiography

(B) Interview

(C) Autobiography

(D) Interviews

(E) Literature Review

5.2 Solipsistic Introjection

(A) Autobiography
(B) Interview

(C) Literature Review

Chapter 6 – Discussion 36-42

6.1 Discussion

6.2 Online Survey Analysis and Discussion

6.3 The Five Factors

Chapter 7 – Conclusion 43-44

Chapter 8 – Reflections 45-46

Acknowledgements 47

Reference List 48-53
1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

“It is evident that this progression of online communication has placed users squarely in a moment where catfishing is and only could be possible.” (Kottemann, 2015) Within social media, an idea that changed the way we behave online, the idea that anything is possible and also allowed, has allowed for effects such as online disinhibition to change the way we communicate and interact with one another. (Suler, 2004)

The culture of under 30’s in western society today is deeply set in social media and online dating, demonstrated by the figures Tinder released in 2014. The figures showed that around 50 million people have used Tinder each month, which equates to an astounding 1 billion swipes per day (Tinder, 2014) and around 8 billion matches within the first 2 years of Tinder launching in 2012. Online dating, social media and the online disinhibition effect have all become a huge part of our everyday life, whether you know it or not (Smith, 2017).

Through my own story of being deceived online, familiarly known as ‘Catfished’, and stories of others, through unstructured interviews, as well as results from an online survey, I aim to draw upon Suler’s concept of the Online Disinhibition Effect to establish why people are deceiving one another to such a huge extent. Ultimately it will aim to tell the stories of people who have been lied and deceived to, revealing the harsh realities and emotions behind such toxic disinhibition and inviting subsequent research to engage and synthesise concepts to answer the question; how has the rise of social media and online dating led to this point, in which people are frequently catfished online.
1.2 **Online disinhibition effect**

Suler (2004;2005) conducted in depth research regarding the online disinhibition effect, answering the question of what elements of cyberspace lead to this weakening of the psychological barriers. Focusing on five main factors (dissociative anonymity, asynchroncity, invisibility, disassociate imagination, and solipsistic introjection) which “intersect and interact with each other’ to create an environment which allows people to be completely disinhibited online.

1.3 **Types of Catfishing**

There are many different types of catfishing, posing as a different gender than you are in real life is one of them. It’s a frequent occurrence that fake profiles are created with an identity which conforms to the social norms of the opposing sex. An example of this would be an individual talking to a profile which is male presenting on both image and name, however the individual then finding out that the profile they have been in contact with was actually female presenting in real life. With the deep emotional connections which can be easily established in online relationships and the creation of a fake profiles easily done; catfishing has become a simple way to get revenge on a friend, ex, or enemy. The motivation of revenge within catfishing will be explored later within interview transcripts. Some people may not look how they wish they did, being able to upload any profile picture, or modifying a photo of yourself, has become a safe halfway house for misrepresenting yourself online. Despite many individuals modifying images of themselves online to simply feel better about their own aesthetics, some change their physical identity in a bid to fool others into believing they’re someone they’re not. Scamming is the type of catfishing which gets the highest amount of media attention, due
to the huge amounts of money which is commonly asked for. Not commonly labelled as catfishes, online fraudsters use the methods of online disinhibition to con individuals into sending hundreds of thousands to their ‘love interest’. Frequently these story-lines run a narrative of love to which money is the only thing stopping the online companions being with one another. “Scammers will go to great lengths to gain your interest and trust, such as showering you with loving words, sharing ‘personal information’ and even sending you gifts. They may take months to build what may feel like the romance of a lifetime and may even pretend to book flights to visit you, but never actually come.” (Scamwatch, 2019). The motivations behind three main types of catfishing will be explored (friends and revenge, aesthetics, and money scam) later within interview transcripts; all of whom presented as the opposing sex.

1.4 Summary

As clearly shown above there are many motivations which lead individuals to create fake profiles. Within my research I look into three cases of catfishing, each with different motivations, alongside autobiographical narration of being catfished myself. Within the literature analysis there will be a severe focus on the online disinhibition effect creating deeper understanding of how online relationships intensify so rapidly and without face-to-face contact. The research intends to categorise the autoethnography and interviews within the five main factors which are attributed to the online disinhibition effect; aiming to create a comprehensive understanding of the motivations and the ways in which catfishing is such a large phenomenon.
2. Research Methods and Ethics

2.1 The Research Strategy

During my study, despite the study being one of an auto-ethnographic nature, I still conducted research which I believe would benefit the study overall. I conducted interviews as well as an online survey. The interviews I conducted were with individuals who knew about the topic of my study and came to me themselves willing to participate in the interviews, as they have had experiences with catfishing themselves. I treated each interview as a separate case study to understand the story behind each case of catfishing, in hopes of gaining a wide understanding of the intentions, motivations, and causes, to investigate how these all come together as integral parts of the ways social networking sites have allowed for the online disinhibition effect to manifest itself within our day to day lives.

Throughout the study, I will not only be telling my story of being catfished but the stories of the interviewed participants; Katie, Becca, and Laura; all who have been catfished but with different motivations behind each one.

2.2 Sampling

The sampling method used for the interviews was “purposive sampling” (Bryman, 2008) as all the interviewed participants contacted me on the basis of their relevance to the research. It should be noted that the participants were not ‘chosen’ to be part of the research, instead they approached me after I had asked on social media for people to get in contact if they have been catfished previously.
Due to the time-consuming nature of unstructured interviews and transcribing them (Miller and Brewer, 2003), it was important that I kept the interviews as short as possible focusing on the main information I needed for effective research.

2.3 Methodology: Autoethnography

Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined an autoethnography as "...an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). For my research, it was important to conduct it in an auto-ethnographic manner. This was due to the research being intrinsically linked to my own experience of being deceived online. A core feature of an autoethnography is that it entails the researcher “...performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon” (McIlveen, 2008, p. 3, and this is exactly what I aim to achieve; to create a narrative based around my autoethnography, interwoven with narrative from my interviews to analyse the phenomenon of the online disinhibition effect.

It was also important for my research and autoethnography to “capture readers’ minds and hearts” (Ellis, 2000)

2.4 Autoethnography: Ethics

Due to the fact that an autoethnography focuses on the self, it can be problematic for the ethical considerations (Ellis, 2007). The problem of obtaining or not obtaining consent to be included in the narrative must be considered (Miller and Bell, 2002); due to this ethical issue within the methodology of the research I obtained consent from all subjects within my ethnography, under the pretence that only pseudonyms will be used to keep identities anonymous. Another ethical consideration lies within writing the
autoethnography in first or third person (Wyatt, 2006); I chose to write my research in the first person as it seemed to be the only way to affectively write the story, as I wanted the readers to immerse themselves into my experience and the experience of those I interviewed.

To avoid the criticisms of the method, for example “autoethnographies have been criticised for being self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised (Atkinson, 1997; Coffey, 1999) I have purposefully added stories of others, from interviews, to give balance to my own, as well as literature analysis of the topic.

2.5 Methodology: Interviews

When deciding upon what type of interview; in regard to a structured or informal interview, I focused upon the topic in hand. Due to the fact the study is based on personal stories, which can have strong emotional connections tied to them, it was important to keep that in mind. I decided upon an informal interview, to keep the atmosphere of the interview as relaxed as possible so the participants felt they could express themselves in whichever way they wished and had the opportunity to tell their story how they wanted it to be told.

Despite deciding on an informal interview there were a few questions which I believed was important; how did you meet the fake account? How long were you in contact? What was the type of conversation which was had? When did you find out you were being catfished? Why were you being catfished? The interviews were all recorded, and a transcript was written in order for me to be able to analyse the interviews effectively. When conducting the interviews, it was incredibly important to not ask any leading questions which may later be construed as interviewer bias; to prevent this, I simply asked the
participant to tell me their story of being catfished in as much detail as possible so I can answer my questions simply from the transcript instead.

2.6 Interviews: Ethics

There were many advantages to the informal interview (Bulmer, 1984) which I believed was important to my study. The interview being respondent led, flexible and the ability to give empowerment to the participant (Devine, 1999) were all equally important to make sure there was a strong rapport with them as well as having the time to give empathy and understanding when need be.

However, despite knowing that the informal interview was the method I was going to be using to conduct these interviews it was clear that I needed to understand the potential disadvantages to the method in a bid to rule out as many as possible. As mentioned previously, interviewer bias (Bulmer, 1984) is one of the largest disadvantages with an informal interview as because there is more conversation between the interviewer and the participant some bias can feed into the conversation. It is also difficult to quantify the data presented within the interview (Gubrium, 2001). However, the interviews are going to be used as a format of real stories to balance with academic analysis, to create a study which focuses around real people and real stories as well as the academic work behind why people may behave this way online. Not to forget, the lack of reliability which these types of interviews are known for (Witzel, 2012), especially with such a sensitive topic; the participants may present themselves in a way which makes them look better and/or makes the catfish-er look worse. The way in which I am using the interviews, however, is not one of making
anyone look better or worse, but to simply give story and context to the research surrounding the topic.

2.7 Methodology: Online Survey

As part of my auto-ethnographic study, I also conducted an online survey (in line with Sue, 2012). The survey asked questions such as if they (the participants) had ever used online dating platforms, been catfished, or misrepresented themselves online. The survey was placed upon my Facebook profile to gain as wide of a response as possible. Despite trying to gain a wide range of ethnicity, age, and background, it is important to acknowledge the demographic to which the survey would’ve been visible to; mainly a Caucasian demographic, between the ages of 20-40. It’s also important to understand that the reliability of the online survey cannot always be guaranteed. In order to prevent participants purely answering in a ‘socially desirable’ way, all participates were informed that it is an anonymous survey and that I wouldn’t know who said what. However, due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions, participants lying on the survey is arguably one of the largest disadvantages to my study. In accordance to the previous disadvantage having a large impact upon my study, the low response rate also had a large impact upon my study. With a potential of 2,168 responses, I only received 54 responses, which was hugely disappointing. Nevertheless, I believe my results are reliable and show a range of experience with catfishing and online social behaviour.

2.8 Online Survey: Ethics

In regard to the research ethics when conducting the online survey, I referred to the British Sociological Association’s Guidelines on Ethical Research. (Britsoc, 2017) The Statement
of Ethical Practice states that “Sociologists have a responsibility to ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research” and that “participation in sociological research should be based on the freely given informed consent of those studied.” In addition, I looked into their Ethics Case Study, looking into Researching Online Forums; as my study is wholly based upon social media and the interactions, we have with one another on these platforms. The case study looked upon three main topics; Informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and anonymity. Concerning the online survey and the interviews conducted all participants were given an information sheet and interview consent form.

2.9 Data collection

Throughout my research, primary data collection is the main method used in addition to secondary data for the literature review. A reason primary research was conducted was because it allowed for much more tailored results (Olsen, 2012), especially with a topic as specific as this research, it was important to collect the correct type of information. The primary research method to which I used, was one of a qualitative nature; as the research was based upon autobiography, interviews, and online survey analysis. The ways in which data was collected were based upon the aims which my research was based upon (Brinkmann, 2013). In regard to the interviews conducted, the data collection method was fairly straight forward, as mentioned previously, the interviewed participants were asked to tell their stories of being catfished, later to be transcribed and then imbedded within the five factors of the online disinhibition effect alongside part of the autoethnography. The online survey was similarly straight forward; a survey was produced online (find the questions in appendix C) which was subsequently posted on
my social media accounts. Due to the nature of the questions asked, they didn’t produce any qualitative results, instead gave an insight into their lives and experiences with online dating, social media, and the ways in which the online disinhibition effect is influencing their day-to-day lives. Secondary data collection was equally as important, due to the requirement of academic literature analysis. Alongside the positives of the method including high validity, as the articles used often maintain a high level of expertise and professionalism, and also the quantity of data available, which is hugely beneficial due to the specific nature of the topic (Stewart, 1993).

2.10 Summary

This chapter has outlined the research methodology and strategy that was developed in order to answer the protentional ethical and methodical issues which surround the online disinhibition affect, online dating and social media in regard to catfishing and deception online. The chapter has acknowledged the advantages and disadvantages surrounding the methodology of qualitative data collection which were used within the research. The analysis in this chapter is an attempt to confront some of the methodological weaknesses of self-reporting techniques such as online interviews, unstructured interviews and auto-ethnographic research.

Research structure

Each of the five factors, of the online disinhibition effect, is structured as separate sections in which there is autobiography, the catfishing narrative of the interviewed participants, and literature analysis to give understanding to
the motivations and potential causes behind the phenomenon of catfishing.
When I started secondary school, I struggled to make a close group of friends, however shortly after starting year 8 and being in a new form class, myself and 2 other girls made up a very close group of friends; we did everything together. We were constantly spending time at each other’s houses and going to the movies despite living so far away from one another. Once our friendship was solidified, we, as 12/13-year-old girls started having an interest in boys, as anyone may expect. Katie, one of the interviewed participants, similarly interested in romantic attention as my friends and I at the time, explained that “I was a massive fan of Post Malone, always listened to his music, I’ve always kept up to date on his social media.”

At this time, we communicated online via platforms known as MSN and Skype, through these, at the time, social media platforms, we communicated throughout all of our spare time. As mentioned previously we all lived very far apart from one another, the furthest journey from one house to another was around 30 minutes by car or around an hour and half potentially by varying means of public transport dependent on days and times. Due to the fact we all lived quite far from one another, we didn’t know people of our age from those areas apart from each other; one of the girls played this to her advantage.

"You can now change settings to hide certain information, you can choose what to put as your location, age, gender etc... nothing is in place to prevent people lying about these things therefore they’re going to say what makes them look good which in turn attracts more people."

- Anonymous from Online Survey

3.1 Dissociative Anonymity

3.1(A) Autobiography

One particular day, one of the girls, which we will call Lois, came into school proclaiming that she has made some new friends from around her area, all boys, all quite good looking. As two fairly impressionable girls, we went along with it not questioning any false intentions. There was 5 of them; Alex, Aiden, Snake, Lexi and Drew. Each new friend has a different personality and relationship within the group, Lexi was romantically interested in myself, Aiden was romantically interested in my other friend Eleanor (El for short), Alex was dating Lois and Snake and Drew were interested in each other. This new ‘friend group’ was the start of deep rabbit hole which neither El or I was prepared for.

3.1(B) Interviews

The start of Katie’s online relationship clearly demonstrates the ease of communicating with anyone, and the fact that society feels as if we can communicate with anyone we wish. Katie explained that “I ended up one night just sending him a message and seeing if he’d reply... I was beyond excited when he replied.”
In her excitement “I just sent him my number asking him to call me to make sure it was him... We actually ended up talking all the time on the phone, I couldn’t believe that I was talking to Post Malone!!!!”

Likewise, Becca, an interviewee also found her online companion on social media, Becca said it all started when “I was just on Facebook and this guy, called Mike, popped up and asked me to go for drinks with him... (he) Mike had apparently seen me in a bar and one of his mates knew me so gave him my Facebook.”

Laura, one of the participants interviewed, stated that “Courtney (Laura’s online companion) and I spoke on Facebook for around 2 years, we met through Facebook actually. Courtney sent me a request and we were pretty inseparable”

When it comes to social media in the 21st century, the ease of creating new friends online is incredibly simple; one click, and a request is sent.

“With the ease of finding people online, I didn’t think it was odd or anything, it happens all the time.” – Becca

3.1(C) Literature Analysis

Being anonymous online isn’t difficult, usernames and email addresses whilst visible rarely reveal much about a person, especially if the individuals creates an email address and username in order to fool or con people (Hollenbaugh et al, 2013). Only small percentage of people are technologically savvy enough to track down an IP address, so the majority only know what they’re told (Joinson, 2007). Suler (2005) defined dissociate anonymity as “the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle.” Emphasising that the actions which one may conduct online may not be how one may behave in the real-world, due the ability to be anonymous and therefore have no repercussions to their actions (Casale, 2015).
For many academics who have researched catfishing behaviour online emphasise that anonymity is the main factor (Barak, 2012). It’s argued that without disassociate anonymity, the level and type of catfishing we see today wouldn’t exist to the extent it does (Smith, 2017). Suler (2003) also argued that individuals who are disinhibited online, in regard to dissociative anonymity, tend to compartmentalise their online identity into a different separate identity from their real-world persona (Lapidot-Lefler et al., 2012). This allows for the individuals creating fake profiles to not own up to their own behaviours as they see the behaviours not as their own but as their online personas (Suler, 2002). The idea of “you don’t know me” is key to dissociative anonymity; the comfort of being protected by no one knowing who you are creates what some may call “keyboard worriers”; defined as people who hide behind an anonymous profile and therefore feel free to write hurtful messages and comments about friends and strangers (Michikyan, 2014). When relating dissociative anonymity to the deception behind catfishing, as Suler (2005) states, the “superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes…” can be “…temporarily suspended” creating a whole new identity other to the real-life persona to which one can behave in anyway one may wish; however still hold be belief that the online behaviours one may partake in “aren’t me at all” (Suler, 2001).
4. [Crushin’] Online Dating.

“People are never their true selves which makes it harder for people to be able to trust”

- Anonymous from Online Survey

4.1 Asynchronicity

4.1(A) Autobiography

El and I were excited about the prospect of having more friends outside our school environment and felt in some ways honoured to have such “attractive” guys be interested in us romantically; which ended up becoming our crushes. I communicated with my new crush, Lexi, over MSN mainly and occasionally via text. We talked about everything, dreaming of what dates we could go on together and caring about each other’s day-to-day life. I didn’t speak to the other boys online, as I didn’t have a reason to, if I wondered how they were I would either ask Lois of Lexi; I would get told about how their school was going, what hobbies they had and how their own relationship aspirations were going. The narrative of their lives was coherent and something which I could relate to.

4.1(B) Interviews

In a likewise manner, Katie, Becca, and Laura, were so engrossed in the conversations in which they were having, they didn’t realise what was truly going on; the harsh levels of deception due to their online companions being increasing disinhibited online.

“I’ve always been worried and sceptical of falling in love with someone I don’t really know, but I couldn’t help myself, I fell
for him”

“We message each other all the time, he really cared about my feelings”

- Becca

“We carried on speaking every day, she was my everything”

- Laura

4.1(C) Literature Analysis

Asynchronicity, one of the six factors (Suler 2005), describes the gap in time between a message being sent and being read. This gap in time allows for the individuals to choose when and how to respond to messages online alongside not having to cope with someone’s immediate reaction disinhibits individuals (Suler, 2004). As Suler (2005) explained “an excessively rapid, even false intimacy may develop”, which starts to help to explain the deeply emotional situations which occur when people talk to strangers online. It’s so easy to fall into the rapid and sometimes false intimacy of online dating when considering the fact, you feel like you can be your complete self and no one can judge you on that basis as they don’t know you in real life (Suler, 2005). Being able to choose what to say and how to say it, takes away the continuous feedback loop which a face-to-face conversation has; the removal of this aspect of conversation gives way for a tailored, thought out pattern on communication (Taylor, 2011). A type of communication which every message is thought through, giving way for a higher level of manipulation to occur (Joinson, 2007).

4.1(D) Interviews

“It’s a lot easier to play along a story behind a screen where it’s just text as validation. People do not have to worry about
confrontation to their story.”
- Anonymous from Online Survey

Similarly, to myself not questioning the authenticity, due to the coherent nature of the stories, all of the interviewed participants didn’t question if they were being lied to.

“We never spoke on the phone though, he (Mike) just never seemed to have time... I never questioned it, he asked me to go for drinks but neither one of us had time for that as I was working and studying so I just believed it was him”
- Becca

“I stopped questioning if it was him (Post Malone) when he started sending me money, like it had to be him, why else would he be sending me money... We never facetime or anything though, but he’s always really busy and everything making music so I understood that he couldn’t video call me”
- Katie

“Despite the fact we hadn’t met I thought our relationship was strong enough to have a baby, neither of us wanted to be pregnant so we decided on a surrogate... I would pay here every time I got paid, I think I ended up giving her like a grand or something”.
- Laura

4.1(E) Literature analysis

Kali Munro, a psychotherapist, described online asynchronicity as an “emotional hit and run” (Munro, 2003); this is down to the thought that sending a message or posting something online is a way of putting something “out there” but being able to leave it there, no matter how hurtful or deeply emotional it may be. Alongside the idea of asynchronous communication being labelled as a ‘hit and run’, the gap in time between receiving messages
can allow for deeper feelings to emerge (Casale, 2015). An example may be if the only messages you’re receiving from an online companion are loving and compassionate ones, then during the gap in time between conversations the main feeling and focus between each other is one of care and admiration. As Joinson (2007) states “Meaningful relationships can be formed in cyberspace because of, not despite, its limitations” highlighting the ways in which the intermediation of screens enables the gap in interaction and communication which face-to-face conversation doesn’t.

4.2 Invisibility

4.2(A) Autobiography

Lois and her 5 new friends created a band, they would spend most evenings together practising, rehearsing and recording different songs together; songs which El and I would get send; songs which revolved around the admiration Lexi and Aiden had for us. This, as a young, naïve, 12-year-old, seemed normal and something which I had dreamt of; an attractive male proclaiming his love in a song he has written for me. It was all I wanted.

El and I would have sleepovers at Lois’ house most weekends, under the promise that the boys would pop round and see us, or we would go and meet them at the park close by. In a likewise fashion to my own excitement at meeting the boys. However, they never arrived; neither did Lois. Ever. El and I would travel miles to attended the movie theatre only to wait there for a few hours, texting and questioning Lois and the boys to their whereabouts, frequently replied with “(name) has been grounded” or “we’re on our way but got lost so headed home”, reasons which were not questioned by either El or I, possibly to our detriment. I would ask Lois’ younger siblings about the boys and if they had been round, soon to be reassured that they had been round many times and played games with the family; to me, the boys did
exist and there was no reason to question it. Lois would invite us to go to the movies together, again, under the pretence that the boys would be joining us for a date night.

4.2(B) Interviews

Becca also tried to meet up with her online companion, Becca mentioned that "I told all my best mates about it, they were all just as excited as I was, they had been trying to get me back into the dating scene for ages after my ex was a d***head to me... They (Becca’s friends) were so happy for me, they decided for us all to go on a trip to go visit him, they said they’d spoken to him as well to make sure that we were meeting”

Laura kept trying to meet up with Courtney, “I was so excited to meet not only to meet the mother of my surrogate baby but also to have a beautiful baby, to be a mum for the first time.”

In like manner, red flags started popping up between Laura and Courtney “I started to think I was being catfished when I found out the baby was born, I only found out 2 weeks after which I thought was really weird, I also thought it was weird that I hadn’t seen a baby picture of him, all I knew was his name, Josh.”, but Laura, like myself didn’t question it as much as she may should have, “When me and Courtney spoke on the phone, I could hear a baby in the back though, so I didn’t question it much, Courtney just said her camera is broken on her phone.”

4.2(C) Literature Analysis

Similarly, to dissociative anonymity, invisibility is one of the five factors of the online disinhibition effect, as is also a key factor in regard to catfishing online (Suler, 2000). Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, just like MSN and Skype, are all text-driven platforms; although most platforms like the ones named do have the capability to use video communication, many individuals use the platforms for text-driven communication
(Kaskazi, 2014). The main reason for this is due to the potentially time-consuming manner which video communication has. Video calling has increased in popularity over time due to the ease of face-time and Facebook video calling via their messenger server. Nevertheless, it’s not unusual for one to only use social networking sites for text-driven communication, therefore the ability of being invisible online is not only easy but commonly practised (Lapidot-Lefler, 2012). Invisibility, in the context of the online disinhibition effect, may give one the courage to do and say whatever they wish. Notwithstanding the fact that this concept of invisibility is closely linked to dissociative anonymity, the differences surface when distinguishing that anonymity is the lack of real-world identity; Whereas, invisibility is acknowledging that the real-world identity may be present but the fact that one cannot be seen or heard is the defining factor (Hollenbaugh et al, 2013). The opportunity to be “physically invisible” even with the possibility of “everyone’s identity known” amplifies the disinhibition effect when communicating online. (Suler, 2005) When communicating through social networking sites, one doesn’t have to worry about what one may say as they are not communicating face-to-face, meaning that one doesn’t have to worry about the reaction they may get (Lowry et al, 2016; Postmes, 2001). Within psychoanalytic theory, it’s commonplace for the analyst to sit behind the patient, as a type of invisibility. This technique is similar to the context of talking to an online companion with the mediation of a screen. The reasons why analysts in psychoanalytic therapy conduct themselves in such a manner is so that the patient cannot see their facial expressions and body language; this is to allow the patient to feel disinhibited with what they wish to discuss (Suler, 2000). The averting of one’s eyes when talking about a sensitive topic is another example of how in our everyday relationships, we find was to disinhibit
ourselves; academics reference text-driven communication as one way of keeping one’s eyes averted (Caspi, 2006; Suler, 1998).
5. [Car Crash] Online Disinhibition Effect.

5.1 Disassociate Imagination

5.1(A) Autobiography

This deceiving behaviour continued for a while. A long while. All until the day before valentine’s day 2011, the boys were on tour playing small gigs around the UK when El and I receive a distressing message from Lois “They’re gone.” The boys were dead, just like that, after months of texting, flirting, and with dreams of one day meeting them, it was all gone. I was distraught. I was panicking, what had happened? How could’ve this have happened? Why isn’t it on the news? It was a car crash. All the boys had died in a car crash. I couldn’t sleep that night, wondering what had happened, all the accounts and numbers we had used to contact them had gone. In our confusion with the whole situation El and I came up with a plan; figure out what happened.

5.1(B) Interviews

“Me and my friends decided to get together and find out if I was being lied to.”

- Laura

“I was so pumped to be talking to him that all I wanted to do was to meet him and he finally agreed to meet up with me.”

- Katie
5.1(C) Autobiography

We printed off every conversation we had, collected any recordings of songs, presents, any content which we could, and we went to a local coffee shop. 5 hours, reading, analysing, mind-mapping, and it came to us; it was all a lie.

5.1(D) Interviews

"I found out that not only was I being catfished, like she wasn’t the person from the pictures, she lied about the baby."

- Laura

"Turned out to some chick, Brooke, who set up a fake profile to catfish Post Malone fans"

- Katie

"It actually turned out to be one of my best friends, Kayleigh, one of the girls who planned this trip to meet him"

- Becca

5.1(E) Literature Review

Although it may be obvious, having a strong imagination is arguably a given when discussing factors into why and how people lie and deceive people online. One of the celebrated aspects of cyberspace is the freedom to escape from day-to-day life; however, when the concept of freedom is taken too far, it can allow for individuals to disassociate from the happenings in cyberspace with the psychological processes of creating false identities and imaginary personas online (Suler, 2004). The creation of an imaginary character and therefore a false narrative magnifies disinhibition (Suler, 2003). Whether one may know it, consciously or unconsciously, when one creates an online character, with a separate online persona (dissociative
anonymity), it is easy for one to believe the online character lives within a separate space with other online characters; emphasising the chance to create a false narrative within cyberspace. (Smith, 2017) Putting into context, the emotionally unmoral ethics which come to surface when one’s online character, with a separate online and offline personas, gets into communication with which the online character they’re talking to isn’t disinhibited online. When one is catfishing another individual, a clear narrative and therefore a superior dissociative imagination is extremely important, so one doesn’t get caught (Joinson, 2007). Emily Finch (2002) suggested that in some cases, individuals perceive their cyberspace life as a game with rules and norms that are separate from their everyday lives. Finch also suggested that once the individual logs off from their online persona, the individual returns to normal life without consideration or association with the online world in which their online character lives; “they relinquish their responsibilities for what happens in a make-believe play world that has nothing to do with reality” (Suler, 2005; Finch, 2002). Suler (2001) argues that dissociative imagination mainly surfaces in fantasy games; however, with the huge rise of the social realm of cyberspace it can only be taken for granted that the dissociative nature which once was only really considered in regard to online fantasy games has firmly made a home within social networking sites. Whilst dissociative anonymity may exasperate the effects of a dissociative imagination online, Suler (2004) argued that both anonymity and imagination differ in regard to the ‘complexity of the dissociated sector of the self’. Despite acknowledging that they are similar factors within the disinhibition effect, dissociative imagination focuses on the worlds one creates, when creating an online persona, one without rules or responsibilities (Hollenbaugh et al, 2013).
5.2 Solipsistic Introjection

5.2(A) Autobiography

At this point the term ‘Catfishing’ didn’t exist. We were shocked. We rushed back to El’s house, evidence in hand, placed some blue-tac over the webcam and video called Lois. “Sorry, my webcam is broken” I said. “That’s okay. I cannot believe the boys are gone, I’m so upset” Lois replied. “my dad works for the met office, he can tell me about any car crash that has ever happened and if anyone had died and who they were, did the boys actually die last night?” I questioned. She panicked. “Before the boys died, they made you some valentine’s day presents if you want to come and collect them” Lois replied, hastily. We agreed. El and I got in the car along with El’s mum and older brother and drove the 30 minutes to Lois’ house. Once we arrived Lois was clearly upset, I went into her room, alone, and found the presents on her bed whilst El was talking to her. After I had found the presents, I soon saw an open file, a file filled with dates, activities, personalities, every detail about each of our crushes, written down. Why? Why would she have this if it was all real and not a lie? We took the presents back to the car, opened them, read the cards, some of the 365 reasons why we were loved, then without a second thought, threw them back at her house and drove off.

Once we got back to the house, we called her again, this time without the blue-tac and simply questioned “did you lie about the boys”, to which she confessed, the boys were a lie, everything was a lie, but why? Why lie? She stated the reason she lied wasn’t meant to cause any harm, simply as she found us both attractive and having these new friends would not only make herself seem more interesting but also as a way to get to know us on a more romantic level.

5.2(B) Interview
When Laura found out she’d been catfished, “Courtney, who wasn’t even called Courtney, she was called Jordan, kept saying that I ‘wouldn’t have been interested’ in her... the worst part of it was like I didn’t care that much about the looks, it was her lying to me which was upsetting... she said she’s never catfished anyone before and didn’t mean for it to go so far, I still don’t know if I believe her. I don’t think she understood that it wasn’t about how she looks, it was about her lying about the baby.”

Which leads me to question, why do people create fake identities online? What allows them to behave in such a way? And do we catfish people without even having the intention to deceive them? The answer seems to be the Online Disinhibition Effect.

Each of the interviewed participants were faced with different motivations behind the fake identity:

“Turned out that all my money went to fixing her car, like what the f***! That was my money!... she wanted to make it work but obviously that was never going to happen, she literally scammed me out of money just to fix her car”

- Laura

“The reason why she’d (Kayleigh had) created the fake profile was because we’d always played games on one another and Kayleigh felt like this was a good way to get me back for giving a random guy her number... At the end of the day I felt like she (Kayleigh) took it too far, I know we prank each other and everything but she really got in my feelings and it just wasn’t okay. She (Kayleigh) didn’t feel any bad at all, she just thought we’d laugh about it when she told me and didn’t expect me to be pissed off”

- Becca

“She said all her feeling were real and that, all the normal s*** people come out with, she wanted to meet and everything so
she could 'tell me the truth' so we could have a relationship. Despite her being real with me and everything and telling me the truth about her identity, and even if her feelings were honest and genuine, I could never have a relationship with her because I'm not gay” —Katie

5.2(C) Literature Review

The ability to create an entire online relationship doesn’t simply come from communicating online but instead from ‘solipsistic introjection’ (Suler, 2005; Miller, 2015; Miller, 2016, Coles, 2016); defined by the online disinhibition effect as when online text is accompanied with a particular voice or image created by the reader, similar to an author or playwright. When meeting and communicating with someone online, having not met them before, our minds may create an entire persona, how they sound, look, and how they may interact with us (Suler, 2005). Creating a theatre of fantasy inside one’s mind which comes when receiving a message from an online companion, can not only convince an individual that they know their companion more than they truly do, but also create deeper emotional feelings towards them (Udris, 2014). Due to the one possibly not truly knowing what their online companion may sound like or even look like, online companions become part of one’s intrapsychic world, in which, the online companion is shaped, not only, by how they present themselves via text-communication but also how one may interpret their online companion in regard to one’s own personal expectations, wishes and needs (Suler, 2005). In the context of communicating with individuals online, with the lack of knowledge about one’s true identity, alongside, the expectation of truth regarding one’s emotions within text-communication, the introjected character inside one’s intrapsychic world has the potential to become increasingly intricate and therefore subjectively “real” (Miller, 2016; Suler, 1999). In a romantic
context, in which this research is based, the elaborate, over-emotional messages which may occur when one is speaking to an online companion can make an individual feel comforted and loved (Joinson, 2007). When one may be seeking this feeling, one may have a tendency to be overhasty and therefore be more inclined to fantasise about their online companion, in turn, creating a narrative which has the possibility to cater more to their desires than reality (Suler, 2002).
6. Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to consider the reasons and motivations which drive individuals to conceal their true identities online; through analysing the autoethnography, online survey, and interviews within this research in light of existing theories, some of which was discussed throughout in the context of literature analysis. The discussion is separated into two subheadings: firstly, it will analyse the online survey conducted to give understanding of the rise of online dating and how it has increased our focus not only on aesthetics but increased the capability to misrepresent yourself online, followed by a look into how the five factors work in harmony when analysis catfishing narratives.

6.2 Online survey analysis and discussion

When asking people on my online survey if they had used an online dating platform previously 70.59% said yes meaning 29.41% haven’t used online dating platforms before. Despite the fact that only 70.59% of people questioned have used online dating platforms, 76.47% of the participants stated ‘Yes’ to the question of “Has online dating put increased pressure on perfection?” Which can demonstrate the idea that even those participants who haven’t used online dating platforms, still believe that the whole concept of online dating has put pressure not only to be perfect themselves but to only seek perfection from prospective partners, in line with Whitty, 2006).

As it is clear that millions of people use online dating sites (Smith, 2013) and only a very small percentage don’t, the percentage of participants who believe the rise of online dating is negative, 61%, outweighs those who believe it’s positive, 39%, with comments such as;
“Makes having a meaningful lasting relationship a lot harder, this is down to the ease of getting 'new partners' being exponentially more available. As soon as a relationship hits a rough spot, both sides are straight to tinder, or the likes.”  
- Anonymous

“Most encounters on online dating sites are negative (with exception of a few). The way dating sites are done is rather shallow as individuals are selecting people to talk to based only on photos. Furthermore, photos can easily be edited/filtered resulting in an unrepresentative picture of the individual. Behind a computer/phone anyone can be anyone, it is possible to bend the truth (such as age). Rise in dating platforms could also result in rise of crimes as people go out and meet someone they have been talking to on the site, without really knowing for definite who that person is, so can be dangerous.”  
- Anonymous

These ideas of the ease from moving from one partner to the next and not truly knowing who you’ve speaking to are the main concerns when considering online dating (Gibbs, 2006). Whilst growing up the concept of ‘Stranger Danger’ was at the forefront of any parents mind (Guo, 2008), however due to the ease of communication between strangers and the encouragement of using online dating platforms, the worry of ‘Stranger Danger’ is becoming a lot less as we are judging people not on who they are as people in real life but rather an image seen online (Cali, 2013). As Guo stated in 2008 “While the majority of online social network users’ frequent sites for these and other fairly innocent purposes, a nefarious few are beginning to infiltrate the sites in order to prey sexually on vulnerable youths.” Highlighting some issues in regard to fake online identities, and arguably issues which online dating has made worse due the accessibly of communication with strangers (Cali, 2013).
However, many people still believe online dating to be positive. This could be due to the fact “it allows shy people to find their next partner. not everyone has the confidence to go out and meet someone randomly” (anonymous from online survey) and the fact that “(online dating) does offer a new platform for meeting people outside your regular circles and opportunities which may help you find someone you’d never have come across without it.” (anonymous from online survey)

Both comments presenting a clear idea of the main and some may say only positive of online dating, the fact that you can meet people you wouldn’t come across in day-to-day life or if you are in-fact too shy to talk to someone in a club or bar (Whitty, 2006). However, beneath both of these positives still lays the question of not truly knowing who you’re talking to; by that, I mean, people mediate or self-regulate the content they publicise on social media and especially online dating (Guo, 2008).

When it comes to online dating and the ease of changing your name and appearance on these types of platforms, the rate of people getting catfished is quite high (Smith, 2017). From the results of my questionnaire 29.4% of the participants have been catfished, with 4% of those being catfished by a friend, 26% by a stranger and 70% of the participants don’t know who catfished them. The survey also showed that people were catfished for only a day all the way up to a year and a half; again, acknowledging the fact catfishing is a very easy process, and can happen to anyone (Smith, 2017). This is solidified by the following question on my online survey which questioned “how often do you think catfishing happens?” with answers coming back as; ‘all the time’ 30%, ‘often’ 52%, ‘sometimes’ 18%, with no one answering that they have never heard of catfishing or that catfishing doesn’t happen frequently; reaffirming my previous thesis, that catfishing has hugely manifested itself within our lives.
During the online survey I questioned the participants if they had misrepresented themselves or considered making a fake profile online; 32% of the participants stated that they have photoshopped an image of themselves, however only 6% of the participants stated that they have misrepresented themselves in a bio. A bio being a small text box on either social media or online dating where you can briefly explain important characteristics about yourself. In society today, photoshopping an image has become much more accepted as something nearly everyone does; whereas on the other hand, misrepresenting yourself could be seen as something sneaky and therefore something the participants may not want to admit.

Arguably the most important question of the online survey ‘has the ease of being deceptive online changed the way we communicate? How?’ in which, 88% of the participants answered ‘Yes’, showing a huge amount of awareness for the effects of online disinhibition. The participants gave their opinions to how deception online has changed the way we communicate, some examples being;

“platforms like Instagram give a flash reality of what people think someone’s life is like and the first thing someone does when meeting a new person is check their social media”

“People spend a lot more time on social media presenting themselves in entirely different ways to who they actually are, and spend less time engaging in face to face conversations.”

“Because we know that anyone could be hiding behind certain profiles. Also, things like photoshop or modification of the age can easily be done online”

- all from anonymous participants (online survey)

6.3 The five factors

When analysing catfish narratives, such as my own, many aspects of the narrative are very much in line with literature and theories regarding the online disinhibition effect, for example,
Suler (2005) identifies five factors, which have been individually analysed through this research paper, all of which disinhibit ones online behaviour, creating an environment in which it is easy to catfish an individual online. Throughout this auto-ethnographic study, chronologically ordered segments of autobiography and interviews has given way to understanding each of the five factors, in the means of clearly identifying when each of the five factors comes into play.

The auto-ethnographic narrative discusses the ways in which ‘Lois’ used disassociate anonymity to create a number of fake social media profiles in order to hide her identity; as this gave her “the opportunity to separate their (her) actions online from their (her) in-person lifestyle” (Suler, 2004; 2005).

The narrative then followed the pattern of asynchronicity within catfishing, the gap in time from sending a message to receiving a reply. In the context of catfishing someone online, asynchronicity is incredibly important (Peterson, 2013); emphasising the collective nature in which all the main factors of the online disinhibition effect have enabled online catfishing to occur (Kottemann, 2015).

Despite the fact that commonly catfishing occurs between individuals who don’t see each other on a regular basis, as for my autoethnography that wasn’t the case, this is when invisibility within online disinhibition is a key factor (Suler, 2004). Invisibility gives way to behaviours in which one may not conduct, let alone condone in the real-world (Hollenbaugh et al, 2013); Alongside the dissociate nature of an anonymous identity (Lapidot-Lefler et al, 2012), one may feel that as well as having the ability to be invisible and not dealing with real-world consequence, that one may not even recognise one’s actions as their own (Casale, 2015). In the context of catfishing, one must acknowledge that without the disinhibiting factor of
invisibility, catfishing wouldn’t not occur as frequently as present (Joinson, 2007).

The very dramatic nature of the car crash, as mentioned in the autoethnography, sheds light on the element of dissociative imagination in regard to online identity deception. Suler (2005) discusses dissociative imagination in relation to escapism within fantasy gaming, however when analysing the autoethnography with the motivation to understand how and why I was catfished, ‘Lois’ having an expansive disassociate imagination is an obvious actor within the narrative. Understanding that one may use cyberspace to disconnect from reality to create a separate world in which one has all control of the happenings, may seem incredibly attractive. In each and every catfish narrative deception is at the heart of it, that deception, with exception to anonymity, is almost wholly based upon the imagination one may have to create an entirely different online persona (Smith, 2017).

Finally, solipsistic introjection, despite it not being a key factor of motivation and reasoning within catfishing, solipsistic introjection is still important in regard to the emotions portrayed and how they are received by an individual (Miller, 2015). Due to the potential lack of communication and the absence of face-to-face conversations, the introjection of an online companion into one’s own intrapsychic world can transform into a “tapestry in which a person’s mind weaves these fantasy role plays” (Suler, 2005). This deeply emotional and sometimes all-consuming tapestry of care and admiration isn’t a reason or motivation why one may catfish another, but is potentially a strategy used, by a disinhibited individual, to keep an online companion interested romantically (Udris, 2014).

6.4 Summary
Throughout the discussion it’s clear to see that alongside the millions of individuals which use social media and online dating platforms (Tinder, 2014), many people believe it to be harmful in some cases (Whitty, 2006), due to the ease of falsely identifying as someone else and the constant pressure of perfection that online dating has ensued (Buchanan, 2014). In addition, the massive spike in the pressure of perfection, more and more individuals are seeking to be more prefect than they may see themselves as being (Smith, 2013). This can therefore lead to individuals feeling as if they can be disinhibited online leading to the creation of misrepresented images or information about themselves on their profiles, or even creating a whole new identity instead (Kaskazi, 2014). Through Suler’s (1998; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005) continual work on the online disinhibition effect, it’s clear to see a strong link between the factors in which make individual disinhibited online and the factors in which create a narrative of fake identity in regard to catfishing.
7. Conclusion

The techniques utilised throughout this research has allowed for a deeper understanding into the ways in which the online disinhibition effect has changed the ways in which individuals communicate online. Not only this, but the autoethnographic and interviewed examples has made critical analysis of the ways the online disinhibition effect has manifested itself into our day-to-day lives, in regard to catfishing, possible. This critical analysis involved in depth literature evaluation of each of the five main factors relating to the online disinhibition effect and found a number of important conclusions, concerning the motivations and ways in which individuals are disinhibited online.

First, it was found that through the analysis of the online disinhibition effect, alongside the narrative from interviews and autoethnographic study, a clear understanding of the motivations behind online identity deception as well as the ways in which individuals deceive others online has successfully been achieved.

Secondly, Despite the temptation of concluding that being disinhibited online has the potential to release deeper aspects of one’s intrapsychic self; that having the freedom to be whoever one may wish online may in turn unlock the “true needs, emotions and self attributes” (Suler, 2005) qualities which may hide within the real-world. The interviews and autoethnographic narrative, however, highlight the potential for extremely emotionally harmful consequences of being disinhibited online and how deceiving someone online can have serious repercussions.
The online disinhibition effect has created an environment within cyberspace, which not only allows individuals to dissociate from reality, but create relationships with online companions, in which, the ease of anonymity, false narrative, and exaggerated emotions come together to construct the potential to catfish individuals online. It is this final point that confirms the relationship not only with a personal autoethnographic narrative and the online disinhibition effect, but a relationship in which all the catfishing narratives that have been considered in this research synthesise.
8. Reflections

On reflection, the narratives which have been used to give structure to the research are not able to be generalised. Firstly, due to the personal nature of each story but also due to the fact that only a very small amount of qualitative research could be conducted. This is linked to time, economic restraints and also the personal nature of this research may deter some individuals from wanting to participate. It was unfortunate that only a small number of individuals took part in my online survey, and on reflection different means of getting individuals to complete the survey, for example setting up a survey booth on campus and thanking participants with an incentive e.g. a lollipop or chocolate, may have produced more reliable results in regard to the online survey. This casts doubt upon the validity of the online survey results and the confidence we can have in the participants in presenting the truth without them adhering to social norms.

Despite finding enough scholarly article eventually, it was incredibly difficult to find any literature on the online disinhibition effect which wasn’t authored by Suler. Therefore, in hindsight, deeper consideration of where to the focus in regard to the topic would’ve potentially helped the discussion and analysis of the research study. Alongside there being very few academic studies surrounding the online disinhibition effect, finding literature regarding catfishing was incredibly difficult as very few academics have studied the topic.

Finally, in terms of the interviews, conducting three informal interviews was incredibly time consuming as there weren’t any formal questions asked. Despite the interviews being time consuming, I still believe that the interviews wouldn’t have
been as successful if they were structured, due to the sensitive nature of the topic. However, the individuals who participated in the interviews were not chosen by myself, instead they offered to be interviewed, on reflection, I believe the research study would’ve been much more cohesive if I had the means in which to choose the participants after knowing what their catfishing narrative was regarding. Finding participants to be interviewed wasn’t possible to the time and economic constraints dictating the methods to which I could use.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Alexander Ornella for his invaluable support throughout this dissertation and all those who agreed to participate in this research.

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in the research study, An Evocative Auto-Ethnographic study: The Online Disinhibition Effect in regard to Online Dating and Social Media, the following organisations may be able to provide help and advice:

Therapy Services (UK): visit http://therapyservicesuk.org.uk
Lets Talk: visit http://www.letstalkhull.co.uk/
Samaritans: visit https://www.samaritans.org / or call 116 123
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