On *being* online

Insights on contemporary articulations of the relational self

Anu Harju
On *being* online

Insights on contemporary articulations of the relational self

Anu Harju
Main dissertation advisor
Professor Eija Ventola

Co-dissertation advisor
Professor Johanna Moisander

Preliminary examiners
Professor Fuat Firat, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA
Adjunct Professor Johanna Sumiala, University of Helsinki, Finland

Opponent
Professor Fuat Firat, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, USA

Aalto University publication series
DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS 94/2017

© Anu Harju

ISSN-L 1799-4934
ISSN 1799-4934 (printed)
ISSN 1799-4942 (pdf)

Graphic design: Tanja Konttinen
Images: Scott Austin (cover)

Unigrafia Oy
Helsinki 2017

Finland
Author
Anu Harju

Name of the doctoral dissertation
On being online: insights on contemporary articulations of the relational self

Publisher
School of Business

Unit
Department of Management Studies

Series
Aalto University publication series DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS 94/2017

Field of research
Organizational Communication

Date of the defence
16 June 2017

Language
English

Abstract
One of the growing research interests in media and Internet studies concerns how the self is constructed in the digital environment, while the complex relationship between the self and consumption continues to be of interest in consumer research. This thesis is an examination of relational being at the intersection of digital media and consumer culture.

The thesis takes a critical perspective to examine the conditions under which the contemporary self is constructed and how the self is articulated in digital contexts, and thus views the online as embedded in the offline. Rooted in social constructionism, the relational perspective sees the self as an intersection of multiple and shifting relations. The aim of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of self-construction in our media-saturated consumer society.

The study examines bloggers and fans and their mediated consumption practices through the lens of the social imaginary. The empirical material is collected from social media sites, plus-sized fashion blogs and YouTube, and analysed in the discourse analytic tradition combined with digital ethnography. The findings of the empirical studies show how 'aspiration' is constructed in the imaginary, with two conflicting, yet mutually constitutive notions of 'being yourself' and 'improving yourself' being negotiated at the site of the self, in the relational flow of the Internet. The studies also discuss disenfranchisement and marginalisation as properties of relationships, and show how imaginaries, in offering a range of interpretative resources for the self, also provide opportunities for counter-discourses.

The study makes several theoretical and methodological contributions: within media and Internet studies, this thesis contributes to a better understanding of the embeddedness of the digital and to the ongoing discussion of how the digital is shaping the self; within consumer research, to the theorisation of relational self in the contemporary consumer context. Treating imaginaries as semiotic systems allows us to see imaginaries as constructed terrains of aspirations with complex significations. Thus, as sources of relational tension, imaginaries can be seen as implicated in the positioning, even othering, of individuals. The study suggests that the self is a fluctuating process of various alignments and disalignments within the matrix of social, cultural, and economic forces, with momentary discursive and relational achievements translating into temporary and situated congruence with others.

Keywords
Digital culture, relational being, self, social imaginary, media, consumption, digital ethnography, discourse analysis

ISBN (printed) 978-952-60-7435-1
ISBN (pdf) 978-952-60-7434-4

ISSN-L 1799-4934
ISSN (printed) 1799-4934
ISSN (pdf) 1799-4942

Location of publisher Helsinki
Location of printing Helsinki
Year 2017

Pages 256

The work is done and the time has come to say thank you. As I reflect on the past years and I think of all the wonderful people who have been a part of this journey, I feel very grateful. They say it takes a village to raise a child. To ‘make a doctor,’ it takes a whole academic community. Being a doctoral student is a delicate affair where, hopefully, the academic community, friends and family, all come together to help and support you, to cheer you on and join in on your success, but if you are lucky, also to carry you through the hard times. I have been very lucky and the community has carried me.

When I first started my doctoral studies at Aalto, as a graduate of the University of Helsinki with a background in linguistics, the people at the Department of Communication (now the Unit of Organizational Communication) made me feel welcome; I want to extend my deepest thanks to all the lovely, kind as well as (and this is important) fun people at our unit who made me feel at home.

I have been very fortunate to have two supervisors, Professor Eija Ventola and Professor Johanna Moisander, both of whom have given me invaluable support over the past years. You both set the standard very high and I am all around better for it. I first met Eija in 2006 when she acted as my MA supervisor. For over ten years now, despite my meandering path, Eija has continued to encourage me. Her meticulous notes on my writing have made me a better writer, for which I am grateful. Eija, I never quite managed to put on ‘the blinkers’ [two pieces of leather attached at the side of a horse’s eyes to prevent sideways vision], as evidenced by this thesis; I want to thank you for making me a better researcher, but also for your friendship.

Johanna, you took me in when I joined the department and helped me find my place. I have greatly benefited from your guidance, support, and friendship: thank you for helping me get where I am today. When I have been down in the doctoral dumps you have always managed to pick me up, dust me off, and put me back on track. Thus, thank you for your continued trust in me when I have gone off on a tangent (ufojuttuja), thanks for letting me get on with things. As one of the most important tasks of a supervisor is to tell the doctoral student what she needs to hear, even when she doesn’t want to hear it, I particularly appreciate the directness and kindness, the tough love, I have enjoyed under the supervision of Eija and Johanna – keppiä ja porkkanaa sopivassa suhteessa, kiitos siitä!

I want to thank Professor Fuat Firat, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, and Adjunct Professor Johanna Sumiala, University of Helsinki, who kindly acted as
the pre-examiners for this thesis. My work is greatly inspired by the research Fuat has done in the field of consumer studies, and likewise, by Johanna’s research in the field of media studies. I had the pleasure of meeting Fuat when he was visiting us at Aalto; I am indebted to him for the conversations and seminars we were able to have during his visits. His probing and difficult questions, at first overwhelming, in the end proved to be very helpful. Fuat, I appreciate the time you have given me, and I am honoured to have you as my opponent. I want to thank Johanna Sumiala for her thoughtful comments on my thesis, but also for her encouragement along the way. Johanna, kiitos kannustuksesta!

In addition, I would like to thank Professor Donncha Kavanagh, now at University College Dublin, who (after I sort of invited myself) warmly welcomed me to his department at University College Cork for a two-month visit. Donncha, I truly enjoyed our weekly talks and I am deeply grateful for the time you gave me and for your comments on my work. Thank you for expanding my horizons and making me think. As it turned out, I changed my dissertation topic after my visit to Ireland, and my side projects became my main project. I have a feeling I have you to thank for this: perhaps being eclectic is not such a bad thing after all!

This work has been partly financed by grants from the HSE Foundation for which I wish to express my deepest gratitude. I also thank the doctoral programme at Aalto University School of Business for the Visiting Scholar grant I received toward my two-month visit to UCC in Cork, Ireland.

During the past years I have been welcomed to various academic communities and research networks and met many lovely and inspiring people. I thus want to thank my friends in the SFL community and my friends in the DORS community for all the fun, collegiality and co-operation over the years.

Our unit at Aalto has the most amazing doctoral student community, and I want to thank Ella Lillqvist, Annamari Huovinen, Merja Porttikivi, Visa Penttilä, Ari Kuismin, Mark Badham, Mia Leppälä, and Kirsti Iivonen for sharing in all the pains and gains over these years. The many late night discussions as well as seminars and conference trips are very precious memories, and I hope there will be many more in the future. In particular, I want to thank Mari for co-authoring Article I in this thesis, but even more so, for her friendship and all the heated arguments we have had. Mari, you have always been available for my rants and worries, and your support has helped me keep going: everyone needs a friend like you.

Ella, I cannot thank you enough. Together we did it! Your input to this thesis is beyond words, and not only in academic terms, but also in terms of your friendship, encouragement, and all the fun escapades we’ve had. I have absolutely loved our trips around the world, mostly because of our discussions about theory, relationships and life in general: these talks have invigorated and inspired me. Thank you for never doubting, you are awesome!

There are so many friends who have helped me tremendously that deserve thanks: Susku, thanks for making the world a better place and for regularly de-stressing me; Tanja, suuri kiitos kaikesta loppumetrien avusta ja tsempistä, pelastit nakhani
ja saatoit sanani kuosiin ja kansiin; Vappu, en voi sinua kylläksi kiittää kaikista puheluista, kaikista keskusteluista – olet minulle tärkeä; Scott, you are awesome and so is my cover photo – thank you; Maija, Miia ja Petsu, kiitos tsemppaamisesta ja elämästä akatemian ulkopuolella; Kati, kiitos kannustuksesta ja siitä, että väikkärinteko on mielestäsi siistä. Erityiskiitos LATO:lle online-terapiasta ja kannustuksesta.


Inkeri, Oskari and Eemeli, thank you for being you. You are my home; you are what I hold dearest in life. You keep showing me what is important in life and for that I am forever grateful. I love you more than you will ever know.

A special thank you is reserved for my partner in life, Robert, who has patiently listened to me, tirelessly read my work, and supported me in so many different ways. I could not have done this without you. I believe this project has left us both quite changed, and I want to thank you for being there for me. It really is so much more friendly with two.

Raasepori, May 2017

Anu Harju
Table of contents

Acknowledgements 1

List of Tables and Figures 7

List of Publications 9

1 INTRODUCTION 11
   1.1 Background to the study 12
   1.2 At the intersection of Internet studies and media anthropology 15
   1.3 Context of contribution 20
   1.4 Research objectives and key research questions 24
   1.5 Structure of the dissertation 27

2 TOWARD RELATIONAL BEING 29
   2.1 Introduction 29
   2.2 From essence to fluidity 30
   2.3 Social constructionism and the self 31
   2.4 Relational being 34
   2.5 Summary 39

3 CONSUMPTION AND MEDIA AS CONTEXT AND RELATION 41
   3.1 Introduction 42
   3.2 Consumer society and constitutive relations 44
   3.3 Social imaginaries as terrain of aspirations 48
   3.4 Social media as techno-cultural construct 55
   3.5 Summary 60

4 THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY: WEB OF (CONFLICTING) RELATIONS 61
   4.1 Introduction 62
   4.2 Social imaginaries as semiotic systems 64
   4.3 Social imaginaries as normative frameworks 69
   4.4 Object relations in web of significations 73
   4.5 Summary: the relational self in the digital environment 75
List of Tables

Table 1. Structure of the dissertation 28
Table 2. Syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices 67
Table 3. Summary of materials and methods 104

List of Figures

Figure 1. Axes of chain and choice 66
Figure 2. Social imaginary as semiotic system 68
Figure 3. Alignment and disalignment as modes of relating 71
Figure 4. Negotiation of conflicting relations on social media 72
Figure 5. System network of Appraisal system 101
Figure 6. Example of system network model 102


1 Introduction

“Narratives of the self are not personal impulses made social, but social processes realized on the site of the personal.”

(Gergen, 1994: 210).

This thesis is an examination of relational self-construction at the intersection of digital media and consumer culture. It examines ‘ordinary people’, fashion bloggers and Apple fans, through their mediated consumption practices bound up with new media practices, such as sharing (Sumiala & Tikka, 2011), ‘showing’ (Couldry, 2012), and connecting (Van Dijck, 2012, 2013a; Baym, 2010) in the digital environment.

Media and consumption have long existed in a complicated relationship (see e.g. Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]; Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 2000; Couldry, 2012; Miller, 2012), with consumption increasingly mediating our sense of belonging to the world while media industries have long been seen as producers of social representations (e.g. Couldry, 2012), thereby acting as gatekeepers of the ideal and the desirable. Critiquing both the mass media and the consumer society, Jean Baudrillard (1998 [1970] laments the effect media representations have in ordering our everyday: in qualifying the everyday experience in relation to the world as it is represented, the media possesses the power to render the mundane and the excluded existence into one of participation.

Similarly, consumption has come to organise our sociality and our everyday, and thereby participation in the world; for Baudrillard (1998 [1970]: 29), consumption can be viewed as an ‘interconnected network of objects’, but also a mode of being. Baudrillard’s is a bleak view of the human condition, taken over by the market logic (see also Hochschild, 2012) where nothing exists outside the system of the ‘code’ that is consumption. Consumption thus presents as a “metonymic, repetitive discourse of consumable matter, of commodity” and the whole relationship to the object is changed from one based on utility to one that relates to a whole “set of objects in its total signification” (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]: 26-27). Consumption thus transcends the point of purchase and utility and becomes driven by volatile desire (Bauman, 2001). Commodities make up a system of signification and come to objectify values, and as use value is increasingly replaced with exchange value, the self, too, is increasingly brought into the domain of value-production (see e.g. Skeggs, 2004, 2011).
The infiltration into the everyday of the value system rooted in consumption and market ideology is also noted by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (2012), who, in tracing the historical development of social interaction, notes that we are at the point where very little is left outside the market, including the most intimate areas of our lives. She aptly points out that “[e]ven more than what we wish, the market alters how we wish” (2012: 224, emphasis in original). Increasingly, then, the market forces seep into how we imagine others and ourselves, further complicated by the new media landscape and the identity possibilities it offers. In this dissertation, I examine how the self is positioned under the conditions of today’s consumer society and new media by exploring contemporary articulations of the self on social media. Through the concept of relationality, particularly that of relational being (Gergen, 1994, 2009), I examine the relational processes of inclusion and exclusion that position individuals in terms of and relative to the market and collective aspirations rooted in consumption. These I explore through the lens of shared social imaginaries (Anderson, 2006 [1983]; Appadurai, 1996; Taylor, 2002).

In this chapter, I will first provide some background to the study and touch on the topics of consumption, media and the self. I will then position the study at the intersection of Internet studies and media anthropology, more specifically, the study of self-construction in the social media context. Following this, the context of contribution is presented, followed by research objectives and research questions. Finally, Chapter 1 concludes with an overview of the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Background to the study

Different forms of media have throughout time shaped our ways of belonging and our sense of self, the latest being what is generally referred to as social media. Twenty years ago, before the commercial Internet of today, Arjun Appadurai (1996: 3-4) argued how media offered “new resources for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds”, noting also how ‘self-imagining’ had become “an everyday social project”. Now, the forms of electronic media have multiplied exponentially compared to then, with social media having secured its position as an every-day medium for not only communication and interaction, but increasingly for self-expression, too. As the digital is infiltrating and organising our social lives in increasing measures (e.g. Lovink, 2011), it becomes vital to understand the growing complexity of the processes shaping the self, influencing, for example, how the self is imagined in our contemporary society.

Today, the concept ‘digital’ can be said to signal the contemporary condition. In particular, we need to draw attention to “how we understand and study the social because of the impact of the digital” (Markham, 2017: 2; see also Couldry, 2012). This is particularly pertinent in today’s context where it is the Internet and different media technologies that increasingly shape what constitutes our social context. Resonating with Baudrillard’s (1998 [1970]) notion of hyperreality where simulation
is realer than the real, Lovink (2011: 13) notes how “the virtual is becoming more real”, wanting to “penetrate and map out our real lives and social relationships”. Needless to say, the pervasiveness of digital media has consequences not only for our sense of self, but for our social lives and how we experience and organise it.

The Internet, in addition to being a communication medium, also constitutes “a scene of social construction”, while also offering “new tools for conducting research, new venues for social research, and new means for understanding the way social realities get constructed and reproduced through discursive behaviour” (Markham, 2004a: 95). Social media, then, can also be approached in terms of the way they offer a snapshot to how social realities are constructed and experienced, and what kinds of cultural forces are reflected in the process. In a bid to move beyond the dichotomy between the utopian and the dystopian views of the Internet (see Tsatsou, 2014, for discussion) and its functions and role in contemporary culture, Lagerkvist (2016) suggests we view the digital media as a terrain that is at the same time existential as well as ambivalent, noting how existential media spans both the mundane and the exceptional as we navigate the digital terrain experiencing everything between the most meaningless to the most meaningful. For Lagerkvist, then, the self in digital contexts presents as relational, vulnerable, embodied and precarious, as inherently human in all fallibility; with this in mind, she (2016: 2) urges media scholars to “critically interrogate the lived and often complexly ambiguous experiences of our digitally enforced lifeworld”.

In this thesis, focussing on social media as the context of study, I explore the notion of the self as a dialectical social construct, as a cultural and discursive performance for which the modern consumer society provides the framework of operation, and which is largely created and re-created in, as well as organised by, the complex media landscape. Through the concept of the social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1994; Appadurai, 1996; Taylor, 2002; Maffesoli, 1993), I examine ways of imagining, constructing and evaluating the self in digital contexts against the backdrop of contemporary consumer culture. Although some studies on social media concerning identity, community and belonging have utilised Anderson’s (2006 [1983]) concept of ‘imagined community’ or that of ‘imagined audience’ (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Sumiala & Tikka, 2011; Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016), the notion of social imaginary (Castoriadis, 1994; Appadurai, 1996; Taylor, 2002; Maffesoli, 1993) has been to a large extent neglected as a lens through which to examine articulations of the self, as well as the interplay between the self, media and social life.

In order to examine the multitude of relations constituting the self I adopt a relational view to the self as developed by Kenneth Gergen (1991, 1994, 1996, 1999a, 2009). I approach relationality from a discursive perspective and explore the interaction flowing in these constitutive relationships, paying particular attention to the different evaluations constructed in interaction. In analysing the empirical material collected from social media sites, I employ linguistic methods, a form of discourse analysis called Appraisal analysis (Martin & White, 2005), based on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1993[1975]; Halliday & Matthiessen,
and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b, 2003); I examine self-construction, evaluation and positioning as constructed by the users on social media, but also how they relate to and evaluate the conditions and relations in which they find themselves. Evaluations as ‘relational flow’ (Gergen, 2009) have the capacity to construct affinity and affiliation, on the one hand, and dissonance and disalignment, on the other (e.g. Martin, 2004; Zappavigna, 2011, 2012, 2014; see also Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, for a linguistic analysis of identity construction in interaction).

As the media, both the Internet with its user-generated content and institutional (mass) media, are not alone in shaping our collective imagination, we need to consider the ways in which consumption and the market forces play an increasingly important role in how we imagine (Illouz, 2009; Hochschild, 2012; Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]). Thus, this thesis examines self-construction as a relational process at the intersection of digital media and consumer culture, intertwined with relatively recent cultural forces such as digital documentation and online sharing and other new media practices. Thinking about the self in terms of relationality allows us to examine the complexity of self-construction in a contemporary context, where the individual is increasingly suspended in a relational matrix involving consumption, popular culture and media of different types, while it also allows us to move beyond such dichotomies as offline/online, real/virtual, or, for example, authentic/inauthentic. Instead, what matters are the various relational forces intersecting at the site of the self, yet linking the self into a wider collective: social media, in this view, can be approached as a site of articulation of various aspirations of the self brought on by different relations, these including the market and various mediated, consumption-based ideologies mediated by, for example, shared social imaginaries.

The notion of the self as a relational being as per Gergen (2009) emerges from the tradition of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1987 [1966]). A constructionist view on self sees the sense of self and personhood as relational, social constructs, and identity as “a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (Berger & Luckmann 1987 [1969]: 195). Thus, as social phenomena, identities are constructed and re-constructed in interaction with and under the influence of the cultural and social forces of any given time, these being in a more or less constant flux themselves (see e.g. Lawler, 2014). Particularly within approaches embedded in the social constructionist paradigm, it is generally conceived that neither the self nor the study thereof (online or otherwise) can be separated from the wider social context in which it is constructed (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1987 [1966]; Lawler, 2014). Furthermore, the social constructionist approaches to self emphasise “the relational and linguistic embeddedness of our experience of self” (Grodin and Lindlof, 1996: 5), underlining the role of discourse as well as the historical in addition to the social in the process of self-construction.

It thus follows that not only is the sense of self shaped by connecting and interacting with others and the cultural context in which we live and engage with, identities are no longer stable or fixed, but have become fluid (e.g. Bauman, 2004), changeable,
and in constant flux (Butler, 1993, 2006 [1990]; Hall, 1996a). Thus, abandoning
the notion of self as something fixed allows us to see the (re)construction of the self
in multiple contexts, and consequently, ourselves in “immersed interdependence,
in which it is relationship that constructs the self” (Gergen, 1991: 147, emphasis
added). Consequently, Gergen (Ibid.) argues, the emergence of the relational self
comes as the final and natural stage in the move away from essentialism that for
a long time reigned identity theories.

In addition, in the relational view purported by Gergen (1994, 2006, 2009, 2011a),
identity is never individual, but collective, and I argue that in the social media
context the collective dimension extends beyond the immediate digital context,
but also beyond human relationships (Gergen has primarily focused on human
relationships). I see the benefit of viewing self-construction as a relational process
as particularly relevant in the digital, online context where people are individu-
als collectively (van Dijck, 2013a; Rainie & Wellman, 2012), but also because the
relational approach allows us to take into consideration other contemporary social
and cultural factors that figure in the construction of the self.

Thus, as this thesis sets out to study self-construction in the context of social
media, it does so by considering the wider social and cultural context in which the
‘self on social media’ is constructed. Next, I will briefly discuss the research fields
of Internet studies and media anthropology, and elaborate on how the present
study is positioned at the intersection of these two disciplines.

1.2 At the intersection of Internet studies
and media anthropology

This dissertation is positioned in the field of digital culture research, at the inter-
section of Internet studies (Ess & Dutton, 2013; Consalvo & Ess, 2011; Wellman,
2011; Markham, 2017; Livingstone, 2005; Tsatsou, 2014) and socially-oriented
media studies, more specifically, media anthropology (Rothenbuhler & Coman,
2005; Rothenbuhler, 2008; Postill & Peterson, 2009; Sumiala, 2010). Drawing
disciplinary boundaries in not always easy, and as we are witnessing the rise of
new disciplines such as these, demarcating boundaries proves even more difficult.
In this section, I will elaborate on what constitutes these fields of research, as well
as explicate how and why they are both relevant in the context of the current study
and how they intersect.

Internet studies, while emergent and still evolving, is already a rich field of study
(see e.g. Ess & Dutton, 2013; Wellman, 2011; Ess & Consalvo, 2011, for an over-
view), drawing on diverse disciplines. Indeed, media and Internet scholar Sonja
Livingstone (2005: 4) considers the interdisciplinary nature of Internet studies to
be one of its strengths, observing that while Internet studies has grown more popu-
lar with the expansion of the Internet, the field “has a longer intellectual history,
bringing diverse strands of research [together]”, and thus, “internet studies draws
on, if not necessarily draws together, academic disciplines spanning information systems, psychology, economics, media studies and sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, among others”.

Although the Internet forms the focus of study in Internet studies, Markham (2017) foregrounds the social and cultural life as objects of study within Internet studies (see also Ess & Dutton, 2013). When spelled in the lower case, internet “remains a persistent umbrella term, covering many different aspects of socio-technical relations in the era of global high speed networks [while avoiding] persistent false binaries that alternative terms might carry, such as online (offline), virtual (real, actual), or digital (analog)” (Markham, 2017: 3). Thus, as a discipline, Internet studies encompasses the study of the social as it intersects and intertwines with Internet-based technologies; this thesis, too, is concerned with the study of the social, more precisely, the construction of the self as examined through social media participation, interaction and the related practices, treated as embedded in the wider socio-cultural and socio-economic context.

Naturally, the Internet, like anything, can be defined in a number of ways depending on how we choose to look at it. Furthermore, the way we frame it influences how we study it: for example, ‘Internet’ can refer to “social spaces where relationships, communities, and cultures emerge through the exchange of text and images” (Markham, 2004a: 96), or it can be viewed as a set of technological tools or as a network of connections (see e.g. Rainie & Wellman, 2012), or indeed as existential media (Lagerkvist, 2016), a digital terrain where individuals explore, experience, and share existential and fundamental issues of life pertaining to, for example, death, trauma and other challenges of life. Furthermore, as just one dimension of the Internet, social media is equally challenging to define. Focussing on platform characteristics, boyd and Ellison (2008: 211) define social network sites on more specific terms “as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”

As one type of realisation of web-based technologies, social media can also be defined as “techno-social systems in which technological structures interact with social relations and human activities in complex ways” (Fuchs, 2014a: 49). Critical media studies, which, when dealing with social media, is sometimes seen as a part of Internet studies, has focussed on economic relations in defining social media (e.g. Fuchs, 2014b; Fuchs & Dyer-Witheford, 2012), more specifically, labour relations (Fuchs, 2014a, 2014b; van Dijck, 2013a) that are taken to hold between users and platform owners. Research in this stream focuses on, for example, exploring asymmetrical power relations seen as inherent in the capitalist social media environment and the consequent prosumer exploitation, while prosumer exploitation has also been critically examined from the perspective of affect (Arvidsson & Colleoni, 2012).

Social media platforms, suggests van Dijck (2013a: 28), can also be examined as microsystems; she proposes a multi-layered model that incorporates the critical
media approach to the political economy of the Internet. The model has two layers, and six constitutive elements: the explanatory power of the model resides in the connections between the elements rather than the elements per se (van Dijck, 2013a: 41). The two layers conceptualise social media as ‘techno-cultural constructs’ and as ‘socioeconomic structures’ (van Dijck, 2013a: 28), the former focussing on users and content in addition to technology, and the latter on socioeconomic power struggles between users and owners, ownership issues, governance, and business models (see also Fuchs, 2014b, for a political economy of the Internet perspective on social media). Looking at self-construction on social media from this perspective, we can locate the focus of inquiry of this thesis in the first dimension as it examines social media as sociotechnical and sociocultural construct, exploring the construction of the self as a relational process in a web of relations where social media provides not only the context but also acts as a relational resource.

Similar to Internet studies, media anthropology is a “rapidly developing new field of interdisciplinary studies” (Rothenbuhler (2008: 1; see also Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002), indicating not only the lack of clear-cut disciplinary boundaries, but also that perhaps such sharp distinctions are unnecessary. As an interdisciplinary field of research (Postill & Peterson 2009), media anthropology has focussed on issues such as power relations, media power, production and consumption of and in the media, the relationship between media and religion (e.g. Peterson 2003, Rothenbuhler & Coman 2005; see also Campbell, 2005, 2013, 2016), media rituals and the ritualization of media practices (Couldry, 2002, 2003; Sumiala, 2010, 2013; Pantti & Sumiala, 2009), media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Couldry, Hepp & Krotz, 2010; Sumiala & Korpiola, 2015), and so forth. Broadly, media anthropology can be defined as a discipline bridging media studies and anthropology: as a research field, it employs ethnographic methods while also drawing on theoretical perspectives rooted in rituals, symbols, and myth in its examination and analysis of media and its users (Sumiala, 2010; Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005; see also Couldry, 2003 on media rituals). Sumiala (2010: 13) writes that media anthropology is an approach that analyses media as a shared system of symbols that organises, shapes and constructs the symbolic and social reality around us, and where the individual has different and varying opportunities to participate in the construction of the shared social reality (see also Sumiala & Tikka, 2011).

The value of anthropological approaches to the study of media (as well as the Internet) has been recognized as something that will deepen media studies, and bring the examination of social relationships, identity and humanity to the centre while not forgetting materiality in the construction of the mediated social reality. To that effect, writing well before the age of social media and the Internet as we know it today, a well-known anthropologist Faye Ginsburg (1994: 13) noted that the benefit of adopting an anthropological approach to media arises from the “centrality of people and their social relations – as opposed to media texts or technology – to the empirical and theoretical questions being posed in the analysis of media as a social form, whether we focus on its production, modes of representation, or reception”.
Similarly, a call for anthropologically oriented public commentary on what are now called ‘media events’ (see e.g. Dayan & Katz, 1992; Couldry, 2002; Couldry, Hepp & Krotz, 2010; Sumiala & Korpila, 2016; Mitu & Poulakidakos, 2016; Pantti & Sumiala, 2009) was already voiced two decades ago: criticising the lack of anthropological insight during the aftermath of the death of Princess Diana (see also Couldry, 1999; McGuigan, 2000), Watson (1997) exclaimed that “as anthropology moves into the 21st century and a strong case is made for the importance of anthropologists turning their gaze upon the culture and institutions of the societies of which they themselves are members and of which, consequently, they have the most intimate knowledge, what could be more appropriate than an application of anthropologists’ skills to understanding national events in which they are so clearly participant-observers”.

The death of Steve Jobs, discussed in Articles II-IV of this thesis, is one such event that the ordinary media user can be said to be an observer of. His death certainly amounts to a media event, too, and his life could easily be examined from the perspective of media spectacle. In this thesis, however, I approach Steve Jobs as a celebrity, but not the more traditional kind emerging from the entertainment industry (e.g. singers, actors, etc.), but rather as someone who epitomises not only the American rags-to-riches success myth, but also as someone able to evoke an emotionally charged relationship with fans by appealing to his own ordinariness. More interesting, then, than Jobs’ public persona is the relational outcomes of the fandom, how the fans adopt him, adore him and how the community forms around him with very specific practices of fandom, which I examine by way of digital ethnography. Furthermore, Steve Jobs can be said to represent ‘liquid celebrity’ (Redmond, 2010), someone capable of offering hope to those experiencing disenfranchisement due the current economic climate in either their personal lives or in the labour market.

Remarks like that of Watson (1997) echo the shift in anthropological inquiry as it moved from studying the ‘tribal’ to studying the contemporary, as well as assuming a position of examining the West, which traditionally fell outside the scope of anthropological inquiry (Coman and Rothenbuhler, 2005). Indeed, Coman and Rothenbuhler (2005) consider media anthropology as emerging from anthropology as it moves to examine the modern society, as well as the cultural turn in media studies. Anthropological insight brings an additional layer to media studies, moving beyond investigations of the media at the centre to include people, their social lives and the social and cultural context the media operates in more broadly. To this end, media anthropology frequently employs central anthropological concepts, such as ritual, myth, and religion (Coman & Rothenbuhler, 2005) to examine the kinds of relationships people have with media, and how people engage with media. Similarly, Article II of the thesis employs myth and the framework of sociology of religion, whereas Article III explores the topic of disenfranchisement and the role of ritual practice in the process of mourning. Moreover, digital media artefacts play a critical role in enacting fandom.

Anthropological research on media (Rothenbuhler 2008; see also, e.g. Postill
& Peterson, 2009; Farnsworth & Austrin, 2010) has proliferated since the 90s. Traditionally, the relationship between media and anthropology has largely focussed on methodological considerations, mostly by way of incorporating ethnography into the study of media to examine issues pertaining to culture and society. Indeed, Postill (in Postill & Peterson, 2009: 335) points out that many a handbook on media anthropology equate the discipline with media ethnography, thereby leaving aside any account of history, and thus failing to provide a definition of the field (of media anthropology) as one that provides media studies breadth not only in geographical terms but historically, too. Thus, in addition to the social dimension, the historical has always figured at the centre of anthropology.

However, anthropological approaches are not limited to the field of media anthropology, but are employed in the field of Internet studies as well. Yet, the scarcity of anthropological research on new media and Internet was still observed in the early 2000s, when Wilson & Peterson (2002: 450, emphasis added) wrote how “anthropology’s interest in Internet-based social and communicative practices is relatively new, and a coherent anthropological focus or approach has yet to emerge”, continuing that despite the early interest, “there have been relatively few ethnographic works on computing and Internet technologies within anthropology”.

This has been seen as a reflection of the peripheral role anthropology has had in studies of mass media in the past (Wilson & Peterson, 2002), yet, as the study of human culture(s), society, identity, and social action, anthropology is a valuable ‘complement’ to media (including the Internet) studies, which traditionally tends to place media as the focus of research, not social life.

We see, then, that integrating an anthropological approach to both media and Internet studies is not only a matter of methodology, but entails bringing the study of social life to the fore. However, ethnographic methods are nevertheless easily applicable to the study of the Internet; as pointed out by Markham (2006), the ethnographic approach itself does not change just because we are engaged with studying the digital, but rather, the important thing is how the digital is altering our sociality and our existence. To this effect, Markham (2017: 5-6) aims to delineate what she prefers to call ‘ethnography in the digital era’ by defining it as “the study of cultural patterns and formations brought into view as we ask particular questions about the intersection of technology and people”, suggesting ethnography be seen more as an attitude, a worldview, rather than a “set of techniques or methods”, thus allowing it to be adapted to the study of the digital. This view on ethnography embraces the interdisciplinary nature and social focus of Internet studies while also taking into account the complexities of research in the digital realm and the need for adaptability of method (see Markham, 2012, for ethical considerations in Internet studies).

Furthermore, we should not forget about the cultural aspect of digital media and Internet studies: Wilson & Peterson (2002: 450) regret the fact that media has been positioned as peripheral to culture, and remind us how “anthropologists remain intrigued [] by the nexus of culture, science, and technology“. Anthropological
inquiry with its methodologies is well suited for investigating “cross-cultural, multileveled, and multi-sited phenomena; emerging constructions of individual and collective identity; and the culturally embedded nature of emerging communicative and social practices” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002: 450). Furthermore, not least because the technologies as well as the media that constitute the Internet are cultural products themselves. The cultural perspective is needed to account for “the interplay of materiality and sociality into the production and reproduction of social order in particular contexts” (Yuan, 2012: 666), particularly as media exist in and are embedded in the social and cultural matrix that shapes them as well as their use.

I have here outlined not only what constitutes the fields of Internet studies and media anthropology, but also the difficulty of demarcating disciplinary boundaries, particularly in emerging and rapidly changing fields such as these. I have also brought up the notion that perhaps strict divisions are unnecessary, as much of the interests as well as theoretical and methodological approaches intersect. Thus, because of the obvious overlap, and because of the multidisciplinary nature of my study, I say ‘at the intersection’. As Kenneth Gergen (2009: 206) says, the “idea of separating disciplines of knowledge is significantly linked to the assumption of bounded being, and its emphasis in the mind as an accurate mirror of the world”. Following this line of thought, I explore the question of the relational being in the digital environment from a number of different perspectives, which I believe offers insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of relational self-construction and the many articulations we find in the digital context.

The material analysed in the research articles presented in Part II are collected from social media sites. Each article revolves around social and cultural aspects of belonging and self-construction and considers these issues against the wider context of consumer culture and new media; thus, the articles consider acts of digital sharing and connecting with other digital selves in the construction of the self, as well as the role of digital artefacts in the social practices of self-construction. The analyses in all four articles are carried out in the discourse analytic tradition.

The next section will outline the context of contribution, followed by research objectives and the research questions.

1.3 Context of contribution

This dissertation contributes to the theorisation of self in digital environments and thus to the field(s) of Internet studies and media anthropology. Identity forms a growing research interest in these fields (see Han, 2014, for an overview of virtual identity studies) with studies focussing on, for example, self-presentation and/or impression management online (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012; Herring & Kapidzic, 2015; Rettberg, 2017b) or social media platforms in terms of their unique affordances and constraints regarding platform-specific possibilities of expression (e.g. Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2011; van Dijck,
The platform-centred, and thus the more technology-oriented approaches tend to view platforms as sites of struggle over identity in terms of how this can or cannot be expressed, but also as technologies of the self (Rocamora, 2011; Chittenden, 2010). Furthermore, in their materiality, platforms and other digital artefacts have also been viewed as constitutive of the self (Siles, 2012).

Rainie & Wellman (2012: 126) have proposed the term networked self, a “single self that gets reconfigured in different situations as people reach out, connect, and emphasize different aspects of themselves”; this concept of the self is “anchored in communication media rather than in multiple roles in social networks” (Ibid.). This view, however, not only resonates with an essentialist identity that exists so as to be reconfigured, but also, it does not adequately take into account the relational influence of other people within the shared media landscape regarding the “reconfigured” self. Wellman also notes (2001: 244) that interpersonal ties online are “between fragments of selves, [not] between whole selves” based on specialised roles people play in different networks, leaving his position somewhat unclear on the constitution of the self.

While media technologies arguably have the capacity to shape identities as “software produces and frames subjectivity” (Lovink, 2011: 101; see also Rettberg, 2009; Marwick, 2013; Milan, 2015; Lesage, 2016), there are other socio-cultural and socio-economic factors that come to shape the self that are observable at the level of social media. Sociological and cultural perspectives have examined the self as a performance (e.g. Liu, 2008 on self as taste performance), or as transformative self-construction through counter-discourses (Connell, 2013; Tiidenberg, 2014), while more psychological takes on online self-expression also exist (e.g. Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002). Furthermore, identity studies on social media include explorations of gender (Blower, 2016; Cook & Hasmath, 2014, Marwick, 2013; see also Herring & Kapidzic, 2015), including Butlerian performative perspectives (Blower, 2016; see also Article I in this thesis) that focus on the fluid and performative character of identity.

However, the problematic issue with many studies concerning ‘online identity’ is their basic tenet of a singular self. This has obvious consequences on how we view the process of self-construction in the digital context, the forces that come to play in the process, but also how we conceptualise social media. The more essentialist research positions result in the prioritisation of the offline mode as “more real” and the “offline self” as the “real” self, implying the “online self” is somewhat less genuine, less authentic, even false (for discussion, see e.g. Ess & Consalvo, 2011; Wellman, 2011). A recent anthropological enquiry (Miller, Costa, Haynes, McDonald, Nicolescu, Sinanan, Spyer, Venkatraman, & Wang, 2016) provides support for the view that instead of ‘meaningful offline relationships’ being replaced by ‘more shallow and inauthentic’ online relationships, social media cater to and facilitates the mediation of existing sociality.

A few difficulties arise when discussing digital media and the self, particularly concerning the ontological position adopted toward digital existence. Language may betray us in that it can be somewhat problematic to discuss ‘online identity’ without coming across as advocating an essentialist view on the self. However, Bromseth and
Sundén (2011: 279) point out how adopting a critical stance toward “the possibilities of multiple identities in the online realm” is often very easily “interpreted as being stuck in modernist and essentialised ways of understanding identity”, yet, they maintain that adopting a critical approach to ‘online identity’ is indeed “not in opposition to having a social constructivist / postmodern view of identity” (Ibid.). Sundén (2003: 23) also notes that “the difference between virtual worlds and the construction of everyday realities, both being cultural and technological constructs, is a question of epistemology rather than ontology”. Markham (2004b: 361) makes a similar point, saying that “the deeper distinctions between considering the Internet a place and a way of being seems to depend on the extent to which one integrates technology into one’s concept of being as well as one’s concept of social construction”.

The relational approach to self I adopt in this thesis allows us to move beyond the individual while including it, and focus the examination on the social, cultural and economic forces intersecting at the site of the individual. Instead of constituting a place, the digital environment can be seen as a spatial, relational resource for the articulation of the self, if also as a contextual constraint like any other social context. Social media are thus viewed as sites of social construction (see Markham, 2017). Furthermore, as relational being is, in any case, always situational, contextual and emergent, I intend no clear-cut demarcation or binary distinction between online and offline modes with the use of the terms ‘online’ or ‘offline’, yet for analytical and descriptive purposes these terms may at times be used.

In addition to the ontological questions pertaining to the self, examinations of ‘commodified identities’ (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006) remain scarce (however, see e.g. Couldry, 2001) in the fields of Internet studies and media anthropology, despite the increasing influence of consumption and consumer culture in all areas of life, including the digital realm. Although consumption fields such as fashion and celebrity, or entertainment in general, are often treated as frivolous and non-essential, they can nevertheless provide an important lens for examination of the contemporary world (Campbell, 1987) as both are intricately linked to consumption (e.g. Firat & Dholakia, 2005[1998]), but also to the media and the dominant symbolic in complex ways (e.g. Marshall, 2010). The celebrity, for example, offers a snapshot or an entry point into the kind of social reality the media is at any one time constructing and prescribing (Couldry, 2012; Turner, 2010), and through the celebrity we can explore what constitutes a society’s value-system.

In this study, both categories of people – plus-sized fashion bloggers and celerity fans – are linked to the notion of celebrity (Driessens, 2012; Turner, 2010; Couldry & Markham, 2007) and media visibility; fashion bloggers often become celebrities in their own right (e.g. McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013), or micro celebrities (Senft, 2013; Marwick, 2013) in their respective blogosphere, and likewise, the media spectacle around Steve Jobs’ life and, notably, his death (see e.g. Bell, 2014; Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014), renders him a celebrity of a particular kind. Celebrity culture is no longer confined to popular culture or sports, but has infiltrated the realm of business and politics, too (Turner, 2010; Redmond, 2015). Also, both
Introduction

categories of people are in the Western cultural climate pathologised or stigmatised to a greater or lesser degree: plus-sized, or “fat” women (LeBesco, 2004; Guthman, 2009; Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009; Fisanick, 2009), on the one hand, and avid fans (Sandvoss, 2005; Fiske, 1992; Hills, 2013), on the other. Members of each group often experience marginalisation due to what is seen as deviation from some norm governing ways of being and doing, thus bringing into focus my examination of social imaginaries as reproducing normative order, if also as offering opportunities for resistance and the re-articulation of existing imaginaries in acts of resistance.

Thus, in order to examine the interconnectedness of media and consumption, I examine social imaginaries (Appadurai, 1996; Anderson, 2006 [1983]; Taylor, 2002; Castoriadis, 1994) as semiotic systems that, forming normative, evaluative frameworks, feed into contemporary practices of self-imagining. Through the concept of relationality (Gergen, 2009), particularly through the notion of a relational being, this thesis outlines a mode of being online that is relational, collective, and continually evolving. The web of relations negotiated on social media is examined from the perspective of what flows in these relationships constituting the self: to this end, the focus of interest lies in the attitudinal, evaluative processes through which we align and disalign with others and multiple other relational forces. I will elaborate on how the self is constructed as a relational, discursive achievement in a matrix comprising relations of inclusion and exclusion.

The power struggles of the everyday life outside the digital carry over to the digital realm (see e.g. Baym, 2015; Herring & Kapidzic, 2015): the digital, like anything, can be used to liberate and to empower, or to oppress and to control. This is the crux of the ongoing debate between the techno-optimists and the techno-pessimists (or techno-determinists). The techno-optimists are said to promote a utopian view, assigning too much empowering capacity to social media, underlining the uniqueness, ‘newness’ and democratising potential (see e.g. Van der Graaf, Otjes & Rasmussen, 2016; Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007; Van Dijck & Poell, 2015; see Papacharissi, 2002, for critical discussion of the Internet as a public sphere). The techno-pessimists have a more dystopian view, focusing on technological determination and mobilising varying ‘moral panics’ arising from the use and influence of social media (see e.g. Wellman, 2011; Baym, 2010). Research is gradually moving beyond this dualism (see e.g. Lagerkvist, 2016), with increasing critical engagement of the study of the digital (e.g. Fuchs, 2016): while pointing out the potential traps of granting the digital too much importance, Berry (2014: 5) notes how the digital still has a “potential contribution to human emancipation”, and that critical theory, in particular, ought to “make these possibilities explicit while simultaneously contesting non-democratic and authoritarian trajectories” brought on and facilitated by the digital embeddedness. With this thesis, I aim to shed light on some of the complexities facing being online and the interrelatedness of the forces of enablement and constraint of digital media.

Constructing the self in and with digital media is closely linked to the issue of ‘what people do with media’: media practices (Couldry, 2004, 2012) are thus
interwoven with contemporary practices of self-imagining and self-construction. Media sociologist Nick Couldry (2012: 57) reminds us that even a socially oriented, practice-based media theory has to stay close to the political economy of the Internet as otherwise “we risk a deep penetration by market logics into the very lineaments of self-reflection and self-expression”. Similarly, critical media scholars (e.g. Fuchs, 2009, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Fuchs & Sandoval, 2015; Fuchs & Dyer-Witheford, 2011) have repeatedly raised the issue of user exploitation in the capitalist social media context, calling for not only alternative social media based on the commons, but also for more critical engagement with social media research. For Fuchs (2014b: 80), “the media in capitalism are modes of reification”, resulting in attempts to reduce individual users “to the status of consumers of advertisements”. While I acknowledge the asymmetrical power structures inherent in the operations of social media organizations (see e.g. Fuchs, 2014a, 2014b; van Dijck, 2013a), this study moves beyond the economic relations at the level of the platform to consider instead the wider context of consumption on a societal level and its entanglement with self-construction (e.g. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Thus, in this thesis, social media are treated as complex techno-socio-cultural systems and artefacts, embedded in the structures of contemporary capitalist economy that operate under the prevailing logic of consumer society (van Dijck, 2012, 2013a; Fuchs, 2014a, 2014b; Lovink, 2011). I will next present the research objectives and research questions, followed by an outline of the structure of the thesis.

1.4 Research objectives and key research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a better understanding of the self in digital contexts by exploring how the self is articulated on social media as multiple relational forces intersect. In this thesis, these processes are examined from a discursive perspective and the focus is on the evaluation flowing in the relations constituting the self. It thus aims to provide an alternative account on how we might approach the self in digital contexts as a relational achievement, bringing together insights from diverse areas of study to better understand the complexity of the constitutive processes shaping the self, and to critically assess the ways in which the self is positioned in the present-day consumer society. The dissertation thus contributes to a better understanding of the relational negotiation of our social existence in contemporary society as examined through social media participation and consumption, without being limited to the digital as the only social context.

Adopting a relational approach to self (Gergen, 1991, 1994, 1996, 1999a, 2009) that stems from the social constructionist perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1987 [1966]), the self is viewed as a dialectical social construct. Therefore, social media is in this study seen as one of the many relational entities intersecting at the site of the self so as to free our minds from more technologically-centred approaches to self-construction and social media. Furthermore, I explore social imaginaries (e.g.
Appadurai, 1996; Taylor, 2002) as semiotic systems that enter into processes of self-construction as relational entities; thereby, they can function as either enabling and/or as constraining relational resources for the self. Consumption, likewise, is approached through relationality: more specifically, how consumption figures in social imaginaries, providing access to shared aspirations.

Interpretative research design allows for an evolving nature of research questions; as the research progresses, research questions are clarified and become more focused, guided by what emerges from the empirical material during analysis. Part I of the dissertation thus offers a re-reading of the four independent research articles presented in Part II. The research articles approach the issue of relational being and self-construction through an investigation of two cultural practices prominent in today's consumer culture, fashion and fandom, largely made popular by the various media and practiced via consumption. The theoretical framework outlined in the thesis for the examination of self-construction in digital contexts is based on social constructionism and the concept of a relational being: thus, the purpose of this thesis is to develop a theoretical framework that employs the relational perspective to bring together consumption, media and the self in the current context of digital culture.

The dissertation consists of four independent, qualitative studies, each with their own research question and focus. Each, however, elucidates different aspects of the constitutive relational processes, elaborating on the relational processes of exclusion and inclusion, and how social imaginaries enter into constitutive relations either as enabling, affirming frameworks, or conversely, as constraining frameworks, while also illustrating how imaginaries are open for re-articulation and the creation of new, alternative imaginaries. Thus, the main research question is:

*How is the self positioned under the conditions of contemporary consumer society and new media? How do social imaginaries function to position individuals through relations of inclusion and exclusion, and how is such positioning negotiated at the site of the self?*

Below, the research questions of each article are articulated:

*Article I* focuses on fashion consumption and online sharing practices, and examines everyday consumption practices as subversive acts of self-construction. The research questions are as follows:

1) What kinds of gendered representations plus-sized fashion consumers construct on plus-sized fashion blogs and how do these relate to ‘the ideal’?

2) What kinds of discursive practices do the plus-sized fashion bloggers engage in when constructing their identities as plus-sized (fashion) consumers, as marginalised individuals, and how do these relate to social imaginaries?

3) In which ways is the ‘fatshionista’ bloggers’ self-construction constrained and/or enabled by normative frameworks, and what is the role of resistance in subversive identity work?
Article II focuses on online memorialisation practices on YouTube, and examines fandom as sacred consumption. The research questions are as follows:
1) What kinds of online memorialisation practices do the fans of Steve Jobs engage in to deal with a relational disruption, and how these shape the emerging self during this transition?
2) In what way, and to what end, do the fans engage with the mythological hero narrative in their re-construction of the historical as a relational resource for the self, and what role does the post-mortem identity play in the self-construction of the fans?
3) In what ways do the material objects, as fan objects, serve as relational resources?

Article III focuses on collective mourning on YouTube, and explores fans’ collective acts of mourning in the context of disenfranchised grief. The research questions are as follows:
1) How, using the discursive mechanism of attitudinal alignment, is the memory of the late Steve Jobs collectively (re)created and negotiated, and how does the historical figure in self-construction as a relational entity?
2) What is the significance of collective remembering for community and the self in the context of disenfranchisement, and what is the role of digital artefacts in collective mourning?
3) How does social media figure as a space where relations intersect as co-action, and enable restorative self-construction?

Article IV continues on the theme developed in Article III, and unpacks the linguistic mechanisms of alignment and disalignment from evaluative perspective by applying the method of Appraisal analysis. The research questions are as follows:
1) What kinds of linguistic processes of interpersonal affiliation are present in anonymous participation online?
2) What kinds of linguistic mechanisms are used to construct alignment, or conversely, disalignment, and what is the role of social imaginaries in emerging affiliation?
3) In what way does inter-group interaction shape intra-group affiliation and discursive negotiation of community, and how does the community serve as a relational resource for the self?

Together, the articles illustrate the complexity of intersecting relational forces and how these are negotiated. They also show how our wish to belong increasingly takes place by way of the market, shaped by market-mediated ideologies; the thesis thus extends the relational approach to self to include the media-saturated consumer society we live in. The next sub-section presents the structure of the dissertation.
### 1.5 Structure of the dissertation

This article-based dissertation is divided into two parts. While in Part I the theoretical framework for the thesis is developed, Part II consists of four independent research articles that empirically illuminate different aspects of relational self-construction in the context of digital culture.

I will first provide an overview of previous research on self and identity in Chapter 2, charting the development of how the self has been conceptualised over time, and more specifically, how theories have shifted from an essentialist position to more fluid notions of the self, and discuss the notion of relational being as conceptualised by Gergen (1994, 2006, 2009). In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of how consumption and media figure in and shape the construction of the self, bringing up the importance of shared social imaginaries as terrains of aspirations in how we imagine others, our selves and our lives. The chapter concludes with an examination of social media as a socio-technical construct.

The conceptual framework is presented in Chapter 4, in which I elaborate on the processes of inclusion and exclusion relative to social imaginaries. I present a perspective on imaginaries as semiotic systems, and discuss how social imaginaries as systems of difference give rise to evaluative, normative frameworks and moreover, how as resources for self-interpretation, imaginaries have the capacity to position us as included or excluded subjects. Research design is explained in Chapter 5, explicating the philosophical positioning of the study and some considerations regarding qualitative research in the digital context. It also describes the empirical materials and the methods used for analysis.

The four independent research articles are presented in Chapter 6, where we are first introduced to the world of plus-sized fashion bloggers in Article I, “Fashionably voluptuous: normative femininity and resistant performative tactics in fatshion blogs”, co-authored by Annamari Huovinen. The article elaborates on how ‘fatshionista’ bloggers negotiate the relational process of exclusion in the form of marginalisation as fashion consumers. Article II, “Fans on the threshold: Steve Jobs, the sacred in memorialisation and the hero within”, co-authored with Johanna Moisander, presents fandom as sacred consumption in the context of digital memorialisation and considers the role of materiality in relational processes. Article III, “Socially shared mourning: construction and consumption of collective memory”, explores disenfranchisement and relations of inclusion and exclusion in the context of normative grief and celebrity death. Finally, article IV, “Imagined Community and Affective Alignment in Steve Jobs Memorial Tributes on YouTube”, offers a more detailed linguistic analysis of inter-group dynamics and ideological contestation as a constitutive relational force.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation, in which I outline the theoretical and methodological contributions of the dissertation and suggest some practical implications of the study. This chapter also includes research considerations where I reflect on my research process, including a discussion of the limitations of the study as well as avenues for further research.
Table 1. Structure of the dissertation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Presents the background to the study, research questions, and the structure of the dissertation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Toward relational being</td>
<td>An overview of research on the self, orienting the study toward the relational approach to self.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Consumption and media as context and relation</td>
<td>Contextualization of the study: consumption and media, the social imaginary, and social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The conceptual framework of the study: web of (conflicting) relations</td>
<td>Elaborates on the relational matrix the self is embedded in through the lens of the social imaginary. Approaches imaginaries as semiotic systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Research design</td>
<td>Philosophical positioning of the research, qualitative research in digital context. Empirical material and methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The relational self online: four studies on social media</td>
<td>Overview of the independent research articles and a summary of the insights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>Presents theoretical and methodological contributions, suggests practical implications. Research considerations, limitations of the study, and avenues for further research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>References to Part I</td>
<td>List of references used in Part I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Fashionably voluptuous: normative femininity and resistant performative tactics in fatshion blogs.</td>
<td>Article I explores marginalisation as a relation of exclusion: plus-sized fashion bloggers resist and negotiate their peripheral position. The study locates normativity in shared social imaginaries showing how these feed into hegemonic ideals but also harbour subversive potential. Thus, consumption presents as relational access to visibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Fans on the threshold: Steve Jobs, the sacred in memorialisation and the hero within.</td>
<td>Article II investigates how material relations in fan practices contribute to an emerging self and continuing fandom. It extends the relational approach to include the material. The study also illustrates how engagement with the mythic can act as a relational resource for a self. Here, the social imaginary is a co-production based on a shared ideal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Socially shared mourning: construction and consumption of collective memory.</td>
<td>Article III shows the relational self as emerging at the intersection of the past and the future: co-construction of memory as relational achievement allows the negotiation of disenfranchisement arising from normativity. Relational approach is extended to include collective re-negotiation of the historical as a relational resource for restorative self-construction at a moment of relational disruption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Imagined community and affective alignment in Steve Jobs memorial tributes on YouTube.</td>
<td>Article IV extends on article III, unpacking the linguistic mechanisms of alignment and disalignment as modes of relating by way of Appraisal analysis. The study explores relational tension between ideologically opposing groups by analysing discursive (dis)alignment and evaluation that demarcate communal boundaries but also strengthen the community as a relational source for the self.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2 Toward relational being

Nearly two decades ago, Gergen (1999a: 217) wrote that the Internet experience is “like a wired womb, a constant reminder of how I am realized within a systemic swim, a process that eclipses me but which is also constituted by my participation”. This chapter will orient us to such relational examination of being online, immersed in the relational flow of the Internet as this, too, is interpenetrated by the social and cultural forces flowing in today’s consumer society. It thus offers an overview of different conceptualisations of the self, starting with the essentialist paradigm before moving on to the socially constructed self. With that, I situate the relational approach to self in the wider field of identity studies but also within the social constructionist framework. I will then approach the theoretical notion of relational being in more detail, sketching the relational framework to self while also pointing out the relevance and topicality of the relational perspective in the context of digital media and the contemporary consumer society.

2.1 Introduction

The nature and state of the self in contemporary society at the intersection of consumption, media and modernity has inspired a lot of research (Bauman, 1999; Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]; Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1991). Conceptualisations of identity and the self have varied across time, influenced by changes in the cultural and social conditions as well as technological development. Drawing on the literature on the self and identity in social and cultural studies as well as social psychology, this chapter starts with mapping out the transition from an essentialist position to identity to a more fluid one. This shift is a reflection of the increasing complexity of the modern world, particularly pertaining to changes such as globalization, increased mobility, as well as the increased dispersion of capitalism (Hall, 1996; Appadurai, 1996; Bauman, 2000).

One of the approaches that embrace fluidity is the relational approach. Adopting the theoretical perspective of a relational being (Gergen, 2011b, 2009, 1999a, 1994, 1991; see also Berger & Luckmann, 1987 [1966]), in this thesis the self is seen as a dialogic, social construct. Viewing the self as a relational process allows us to include social media in the theorising of contemporary articulations of the self without privileging technology, but also to move beyond the binary distinction of
offline/online existence. Furthermore, adopting a relational approach enables us to include the surrounding consumer culture and its values as embedded in social imaginaries as constitutive relational force.

The relational approach presented in this present chapter will be a running theme throughout this work that will be developed in the conceptual framework, but first, I will provide a short overview of the historical development of the self in order to situate the relational being in the wider field of identity theories.

2.2 From essence to fluidity

Identity and its theoretical conceptualisations have shifted over time reflecting cultural, social, technological and scientific changes (Callero, 2003; see Lemert, 2014, for historical overview). Yet, identity has not always attracted scholarly attention, being relatively new as a focus of academic interest. Indeed, it is fair to say that ‘identity’ is not something that has always “existed” or something that people have been preoccupied with, scientifically or in their everyday lives, but is a relatively recent construction (Bauman, 2004; Callero, 2003; Lawler, 2014). In sociology, identity only started to attract the interest of scholars once it became ‘troublesome’ (Bauman, 2004), that is, when belonging by way of, for example, national identity (see e.g. Edensor, 2002; Hall, 1990, 1996b) was no longer straightforward, accelerated by developments in cultural studies, feminism, queer theory and poststructuralism (Callero, 2003). Likewise, the social dimension is not something that has always figured in the conception of the self, and the earlier accounts of identity emphasised not only consistency and fixity but, more importantly, the internal quality and origin of the self (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Lawler, 2014), leaving the social context out of the conceptualisation of self.

Such psychological essentialism, where identity is viewed as an essential property of a person, has been seen as a product of modernism, arising initially from the discourses of the Enlightenment era (Callero, 2003; Gergen, 1999a, 2015; Lawler, 2014). The Enlightenment rendered people reasonable beings, endowed with not only reason and rationality, but also with a self that was coherent, unitary and singular. The self was viewed as something fixed: as an intrinsic quality of the individual, the self resided within, and this inner core remained constant and unchangeable. Although essentialism has received a lot of criticism (see e.g. Phillips, 2010) and has been largely replaced by more constructionist conceptions of self (Callero, 2003), it nevertheless still underlies the more commonsensical understandings of identity (Lawler, 2014) resting on the notion that there is a “real self”, one identity that is then managed, concealed, or authentically expressed.

What followed the Enlightenment subject was the sociological subject, which was again followed by the postmodern subject (Hall, 1996: 597). While the Enlightenment subject was considered to possess an inner core that would lead to a stable, unchangeable identity, the sociological subject emerged as one constituted in and by interaction
with others and the society, reflecting the increasing complexity of the world. This thinking was largely based on the symbolic-interactionist tradition (Callero, 2003; Phillips, 2010) and the idea of reflexivity (see e.g. Chaffee, 2014) of the social self. However, Hall (1996) points out that the sociological subject, even if shaped in and by interaction, was nevertheless grounded in the notion of identity being an essential property of the individual, the self thus being bounded and singular. Postmodern identities, on the contrary, “reject categories in favour of fluidity” (Han, 2014a: 89).

Taking the social dimension in the constitution of the self further still, the postmodern subject is not only socially, but also discursively constructed, all the time being historically, culturally and politically situated (Callero, 2003; see Han, 2014a, for an overview of postmodern identity theories). Importantly, the post-modern subject is seen as emerging from the intersection of power relations of varying kinds, “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (Hall, 1996: 598). For Hall (1996), there is a connection between the multiplication of systems of meaning and cultural representations, and the multitude of possible identities we may identify with on a temporary basis (see also Bauman, 2004). For Hall (1996), a completely unified and coherent identity is nothing but a fantasy (see also Butler, 1993, 2006 [1990]) and any sense of potential coherence arises from narratives of the self we construct ourselves (see also Gergen, 2009; Giddens, 1991; Somers & Gibson, 1993).

Yet, we can approach the notion of coherence slightly differently; fluidity does not necessarily have to mean we need to reject coherence altogether, but rather, coherence may be redefined as something that “has to be continually reproduced to ensure fixity” (Edensor, 2002: 29). In the relational account of the self, fluidity emerges from the multiplicity of relations and the potentiality of new relations, and thus the inherently changeable flow that runs in these relationships; coherence, on the other hand, while the enemy of the postmodern self, has a place in the relational account, where its value is “derived from our participation within particular relationships” (Gergen, 2009: 397) and as such, it is relational (as well as situational, so already inherently different from any essentialist notion of coherence) and can be located in particular relationships where co-action is affirmative, and which, in this relational context, can have a stabilizing effect as the outcome of the relationship.

The next section will discuss in more detail how social constructionism influenced conceptualisations of the self and how this leads us to the relational being.

2.3 Social constructionism and the self

Social constructionism is an epistemological paradigm that views social reality as socially constructed, that is, it views knowledge as socially constructed and “has therefore an epistemological not an ontological perspective” (Andrews, 2012). The knowledge of our existence and of our social lives, as well as of the self and how
it becomes to be, is thus a construction influenced by social and cultural factors. In their influential book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1987 [1966]: 68) state that the “formation of the self, then, must be understood in relation to both the ongoing organismic development and the social process in which the natural and the human environment are mediated through significant others”. Their account emphasizes both the relational aspect of self-construction and the significance of the other in the process of self-construction. Seeing the self as a social product, Berger and Luckmann (Ibid.) also note how “the self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they are shaped”. The social constructionist approach includes investigations of power in constructions of the self, something that was missing from the essentialist views.

Gergen (2015: 3) encapsulates the central premise of social constructionism as follows: “what we take to be the truth about the world importantly depends on the social relationships of which we are part”. Likewise, what we take to be real is constructed in and by language. As we describe things we assign meanings to them and thus make them appear as such: as we communicate with others, we participate in the construction of a shared version of reality. Furthermore, the social constructionist ideas “emerge from a process of dialogue” that is on-going and open for participation; for this reason, Gergen (2015) notes, there is no authoritative account that would represent everyone who is participating in the dialogue, but rather there exists a multitude of perspectives, which inevitably also provides grounds for tensions between different views. Many things we might view as true or real are matters of social agreement and there are numerous traditions of understanding that we rely on in making sense of our social world.

In sociology, too, the thought that it is not possible to examine the self ‘outside the social’ has been gaining more ground (e.g. Lawler, 2014), and despite some differences in approach, there is a general agreement of the socially constructed nature of the self (Callero, 2003), even though to what extent may still be a matter of dispute. Callero also (2003: 127) points out that while the socially constructed self “may appear centred, unified, and singular”, the symbolic structure the self is a configuration of is “as multidimensional and diverse as the social relations that surround it”, cultural meanings being changeable and in flux at any given time.

Social constructionism is strongly linked to discursive approaches to the self (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). As soon as we start describing things, specifying what things are, we “enter a world of discourse” and thereby participate in one tradition of understanding (at the expense of some other) that entail certain sets of value preferences (Gergen, 2015: 219). Discursive approaches (e.g. Butler, 1993) share the view that the self constituted by language and discourse, being shaped by available subject positions in discourse; for example, Butler (1993) argues for the fluid and performative nature of gender identity. For her, gender is a discursive production. Roughly, the discursive approaches can be seen as falling into two categories depending on how identity is realised, that is, either as “discursive performance
Gergen (1994: 185), too, has proposed we view self-conception as discourse about the self, that is, “the performance of languages available in the public sphere” whereby the self is made culturally intelligible by way of narration within ongoing relationships. The narrative constructions are based on cultural meanings and form “a set of ready-made intelligibilities [] offering a range of discursive resources for the social construction of the self” (Gergen, 1994: 199). Thus, when we look at identity as a socially and culturally constructed sense of self, it is usually relationally attached to different collectivities (McGuigan, 1999). It then becomes of interest to examine what these collectivities are like, or how they are imagined as being like, and how the process of identifying with a given collective takes place. Collectivities offering points of identification range from nations and national identities (e.g. Edensor, 2002; Hall, 1990, 1996b) to ethnic groups and racial identities (e.g. Hall, 1992, 1997b), class identities (e.g. Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2011) to gender and gender identities (e.g. Butler, 2006 [1990], 2004), and as discussed in this dissertation, imagined collectives evoked by shared social imaginaries. The concept of identification helps us think about the process of identity formation, and has been defined, for example, as “a psychoanalytic concept concerned with the operations through which a subject is constituted”, that is, as “processes through which individuals assimilate an aspect or property of an other, and are, in that process, transformed” (Kulick, 2005: 618). Hall (1996a, 1990), however, sees the term as drawing on both the psychoanalytic and discursive traditions and stressed the constructed nature of identifications.

Wanting to elaborate on the more unconscious dimensions of the self and of alignment with social positions, Kulick (2005) emphasises the crucial difference between ‘identification’ and ‘identity’: identifications are “structured just as much by rejections, refusals and disavowals as they are structured by affirmations”, whereas identity is only partly composed of identifications, which again may be either assimilated or rejected altogether. However, even the rejected or denied identifications are constitutive and may thus result in contradictory processes at the site of the self. Gergen (2009) shares this view. Thus, identifications do not constitute a “coherent relational system”, meaning that the constituting processes may be conflicting, even contradictory, and a person’s identity can thus be “disrupted or contradicted by identifications s/he is unaware or unconscious of” (Kulick, 2005: 619). Identification, therefore, has the capacity to trouble identity: in a similar fashion, the gender theorist Judith Butler (1993:105) states that identifications:

“belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmatic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitations, they unsettle the I; they are the sedimentation of the ‘we’ in the constitution of any I, the structuring present of alterity in the very formulation of the I. Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted, and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way.”
Identity, then, can be seen as that which follows from identifications, yet something that can be disrupted by them. From a discursive perspective, identification is as a construction, and therefore always in process and never reaching completion, drawing on both material and symbolic resources in its construction (Hall, 1996a). In cultural studies, identity is commonly predicated on the notion of difference and distinction (Butler, 2004; Grossberg, 1996; Hall, 1990, 1996a, 1996b; Weedon, 2004). Hall (1996a: 5) underlines identity as ultimately constructed though difference, in particular, “through the relation to the other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside”. In this way, we can also consider the dominant identities and dominated, marginalized identities as mutually constitutive (Grossberg, 1996). Indeed, Hall (1990: 222) urges us to think of identity not as a fact that has already been accomplished, and then represented by various cultural practices, but rather “as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation”. The outside, then, even when disrupting, nevertheless constitutes identity.

We see how in these accounts identity is seen as relational, defined “in a relation of difference to what it is not” (Weedon, 2004: 19), that is, as emerging relative to the other. However, this is a slightly different conceptualisation of relationality in Gergen’s relational approach to self, which emphasises the relationship itself, what flows in the relationships intersecting at the site of the self and, ultimately, constituting the self. Such contextualized self is the outcome of the relational processes intersecting at the site of the self. Although social constructionism has been accused of ignoring biology or indeed ‘reality’ as in Searle’s ‘brute facts’, Gergen (2015: 219) maintains that “the realist objection is based on a misunderstanding of constructionist proposals”, pointing out that social constructionism is, essentially, “ontologically mute”, that is, it does not deny or acknowledge the existence of anything (Gergen, 2011b; Andrews, 2012); rather, it asserts that all meaning, and all knowledge we have of things, is a social construction. Likewise, understandings of these social realities (that is, the socially constructed realities) are inseparable from the systems in which they are experienced and interpreted (e.g. Chandler, 2007). We have now seen how different theoretical approaches to self direct us to different kind of analysis, and how different notions of what constitutes the self generate different forms of knowledge. I will next elaborate on the theoretical approach that sees the self as a relational being.

### 2.4 Relational being

Gergen’s account of the relational being (2009) continues in the tradition of social constructionism, and sees the self as a socially constructed, dialogic entity that is thus constantly undergoing change, continually shifting, contextual as well as
collective (for critique, see Clegg, 2011, and for response, Gergen, 2011b; see also Churchill, 2011). It thus abandons any idea of a bounded being (Gergen, 2009), individualism that entails prioritising the self at the cost of relationships. In the individualist tradition a person is seen as having an inner and outer side to them, a mental world, an inner region that houses the self. Such an atomistic view of the self posits that it is separate entities who interact in relationship; the strongly relational approach (see Slife, 2004), however, sees no distinction between entities but considers these to be in a relation of mutual constitution, where “each thing, including each person, is first and always a nexus of relations” (Slife, 2004: 159). In terms of terminology, ‘self’, for Gergen (2009: xxvi) still carries remnants of individualist thinking (see also McRobbie, 2004) and resonates with an idea of a distinct unit, an enduring entity as just described: to counter such an implication, he proposes to use the more ambiguous term, ‘being’, because “[i]n being, we are in motion, carrying with us a past as we move through the present into a becoming” (Ibid.). Similarly, the concept of being does away with boundaries that the essential self depended on: while the essentialist notion of the self maintains the self as bounded, and thus decontextualized, singular and contained, the relational view treats the self as contextual, thus placing emphasis on being as process.

While the other has been regarded as instrumental in the continual development and shifting of identity in both cultural (e.g. Hall, 1990, 1992, 1996b) and sociological theories (see Callero, 2003), the relational account departs from these accounts in one crucial aspect: the relational approach moves the focus away from the self and places the relationship at the centre of attention (Gergen, 2009; see also Hermans, 2001). However, placing emphasis on relationships is not to say the other is not important in the relational framework, on the contrary: while stressing the co-constitution of our existence and thereby acknowledging the importance of the constitutive other, Gergen (2009: xv, emphasis added) explicates that by relationship, he means “a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self”, rather than relationships “between otherwise separate selves”. Thus, this account of self as a relational entity does not view the other so much as a separate entity, but rather sees multiple selves as inter-linked in relations, as multi-beings “immersed in the continuous stream of relating” (Gergen, 2015:117). Consequently, we are “always already emerging from relationship” (Gergen, 2009: xv) and thus also absolutely dependent on the context (Slife, 2004). This premise of absolute relationality is what allows us to shift our attention away from the self, as in this thesis, to the surrounding constitutive relations that meet at the site of the self, and in which the self is embedded.

Thus, we are suspended, as it were, in a network of relations that are based on interaction (Gergen, 1994). In addition to interpersonal relationships, we also interact with inanimate objects. Social relations are thus not static states, but rather they are continuously unfolding, changing, and evolving, depending on the relational scenario we find ourselves in. Relationships are understood as being based on interaction; the self, too, is not an entity but a process, a meeting point where...
different relations meet and which then shape the self in a dynamic fashion. Thus, a person in this view is never ‘complete’ as the self is continually co-constructed in the web of relations in a dialogic manner, where relationships are dynamic, unfolding processes as well as unpredictable (Burkitt, 2014).

Burkitt (2014: 20) defines interaction as a relational process “that goes on between elements that are not understood to be independent at any point in the process, because each takes on their meaning and identity in relations: furthermore, their meaning and identity changes in relational processes”. As people are inter-linked in a relational fashion, there is no scenario where others are ‘the cause’ and we are ‘the effect’ because all that there is, is participation in a relationship (Gergen, 2009) from where thinking, feeling and remembering emerges. Indeed, emotion, too, is emergent in particular relational scenarios (Burkitt, 2014) that we can view as ‘emotional scenarios’ (Ibid). Thus, all action and all meaning is “relational in origin and performance” (Gergen, 2011a: 281), and identities are at no point individual as “each is suspended in an array of precariously situated relationships” (Gergen, 1994: 209). As such, there is a strong collective dimension inherent in the relational approach. Therefore, there is also no need to distinguish between individual and collective selves, because “[w]hat enables or invites us to move in one direction as opposed to another is […] our participation in multiple relational traditions”, these traditions being part of us and offering different forms of action. It thus follows that “we are neither free nor constrained, on this account, but with each new relationship in which we participate we expand the domain of possible action” (Gergen, 2011b: 317-318). Likewise, our experiences emerge in interaction with other people and our immediate situational context (Burkitt, 2014).

Possible action derives not only from the present situation, but is essentially oriented to the future while having roots in the past. The self as a process underlies this future-oriented action, at the same time underlining the potentiality of the self, but also the ‘becoming’ of the self. The relational view is dialogic (see also Hermans, 2001 on the dialogic self) and brings these two temporal realms together. Thus, in addition to building on social constructionism, the relational view of the self also draws from the Bakhtinian notion of dialogism (Gergen, 1999a, Gergen, 2009). The basic premise of dialogism posits that every act and every utterance stands in relation to both its past and its future; that is, utterances, and meanings, are by nature relational rather than stand-alone entities. Viewed in Bakhtinian terms, then, the relational self can be seen as dialogic (Gergen, 1999a): it is historical as much as it is situated, all the time oriented to the future and all the potentialities that lie ahead. However, the difference of the Bakhtinian view relative to the relational view is that in Bakhtin’s account, Gergen (1999a: 131) maintains, it is very much the individual at the centre, an individual who instigates and initiates the dialogue and “who carries past dialogues into the present”, whereas in Gergen’s relational account, it is the relationship that assumes centre stage. Although, even for Bakhtin, the ability to mean arises from meanings made in a relationship, the locus of meaning-generation is the individual, who remains the one who produces
and the one who interprets, whereas for Gergen, the situation is reverse. Yet, both share the idea that the self cannot be separated from the other see (Gergen, 1999a: 131), the other always being present in the generation of meaning, any utterance having its putative hearer/reader/audience/Other embedded in it.

The relational view adopts a performative approach and sees psychological language and discourse as performative in that language creates the relationship, and qualitatively as a certain type of relationship where each utterance functions to “modify or adjust the relationship in subtle ways” (Gergen, 1999a: 132). Furthermore, things traditionally thought to be properties of the internal realm of a person, such as reason, emotion, motivation, memory and experience, are viewed as performances relationally embedded, not only between or among individuals, but also as historically and culturally embedded (Gergen, 2009). And although in the constructionist tradition discourses pertaining to the mind (love, grief, sadness) are considered cultural constructions, what matters is not their “realness” but the effect they have on social life and on relationships constituting it (Gergen, 2015). Performances are thus integral parts of relationship, constituting it, carrying past relationships in them but also the future ones (Gergen, 2009). It thus follows that “there is no creation of an independent mind through social relationships” (1999a: 133, emphasis added), but rather there is action and co-action in a relationship and through that relationship these gain meaning.

To further clarify the nature of relationality, it is important, at this point, to mention some of the differences between some other accounts that feature the notion of relational self and Gergen’s take on the relational self. In accounts of identity in social psychology (see, e.g. Sedikides & Brewer, 2001), the self is seen as being composed of different dimensions: the individual, the relational, and the collective self. The individual self is seen to be the result of differentiation from others and it thus underlines uniqueness, whereas the relational self is the result of assimilation of significant others, emphasising “those aspects of the self-concept that are shared with relationship partners and define person’s role or position within significant relationships” (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001: 1). Collective self, as the term implies, relies on inclusion in larger social collectives, usually based on an oppositional existence relative to some other group, resulting in the formation of in-groups and out-groups. Contrary to the personal bond important in the emergence of the relational self, relationships underlying the collective self are considered to be impersonal, often based on a common identification with the group, based on a common interest or symbolic consumption. In social identity theory, this sense of collective self is referred to as a social identity (see e.g. Stets & Burke, 2000).

These three self-representations described above are seen as comprising the self-concept of an individual (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001), variously triggered in different social contexts. However, in the relational approach advocated by Gergen, self-conception is approached in terms of discourse about the self, that is, “the performance of languages available in the public sphere” whereby the self is made culturally intelligible by way of narration within ongoing relationships (Gergen,
Therefore, differentiation such as described above is, nevertheless, ultimately a quality of a relational process, one of alienation (Gergen, 2009). Viewing the person as a node where multiple relations intersect, some of these relations are likely to be such as to give rise to alienation and disagreement. Emotion, as well as reason, memory, experience, and such “are essentially performances within relationship” (Gergen, 2009: 397). It is a relational context wherein emotions emerge as part of as well as characteristic of that relationship (rather than existing “out there”), and these relations are based on interaction. There is nothing to say that interaction is always positive in nature, which the view on assimilating significant others (see e.g. Sedikides & Brewer, 2001) suggests, but can also be negative: in the three-layered model described above, negative interaction would lead to differentiation and to the emergence of an individual self, and the relational self would only emerge from a process of assimilation. However, for Gergen (1999a: 159), in cases where individuals are located in “oppositional realities”, affirmation of the other despite disagreement can still take place; this is because affirmation is not only of positive quality (compare Kulick, 2005, who discusses disavowal and rejection), and as little an engagement as, for example, curiosity, nevertheless constitutes an act of affirmation. In sum, for Gergen, acknowledgement and recognition function as forms of affirmation, but this does not mean that such recognition is always positive.

Self-concept is usually discussed in terms of social relationships, that is, in conjunction with human relationships as these are based on and emerge from interaction. With this thesis, I extend the notion of the relational being to include relational processes with material objects we interact with and the complex set of meanings these become infused with, a research direction Gergen (2011b: 319) has also called for, noting that “it would be useful and desirable to extend this account of relational being to what we commonly constructs as the physical environment”. In the social media context, we can examine how relationships are discursively constructed and how participation is carried in multiple contexts, resulting in a multi-sited self. Furthermore, the role that hegemonic cultural discourses play in the relational acts online is an important dimension of the relational existence. This is because according to the relational ontology, “there are no truly individual actors; we are always already constituents of relationship. To say that “I decided” is to misappropriate for the self what more properly is an outcome of relationship” (Gergen, 2011b: 318, emphasis added). However, this is not to deny individual their agency, but an attempt to “replace subject and object separation with an inseparable and mutually defining subject/object” (Gergen, 2011b: 318).

Aiming thus to move beyond the binary of individual with agency versus individual as passive and acted on, instead of free agency, Gergen (2011b: 317) proposes we see individuals as “the common intersection of multiple relations”. In this way, action arises from engagement in relational processes that are multi-directional. Technology not only increases the presence of others in our social life and hence the relational input (Gergen, 1996), making it multi-voiced, but such 'social saturation'
of the contemporary society also multiplies the sources and “standards available for self-comparison” (Gergen, 1991: 148) and self-evaluation (Gergen, 2009). The changing digital context not only accelerates these processes and forces of globalisation, but is also likely to shape how we theorise the self (e.g. Callero, 2003; Markham, 2004b, 2013b, 2017) and the assumptions we have regarding the self.

2.5 Summary

I have outlined the main theoretical shifts in how the self has been conceptualised and situated the relational approach to self within the social constructionist framework. I also briefly discussed the relevance and topicality of the relational perspective in the context of digital media. Fragmentation, consumption and the media are heavily interlinked in the cultural climate we are experiencing today, and this is largely due to capitalism (e.g. Hjarvard, 2008; Hochschild, 2012). Furthermore, as the processes of globalization continue to “destabilize traditional practices and cultural assumptions, the self is exposed in various ways” (Callero, 2003: 115). By taking the self as an analytical tool we can examine the social reality and the conditions therein: the self thus constitutes “a privileged site for asking important questions about the social” (Couldry, 2000: 122).

The processes of globalization together with technological advancement are rendering the relational approach more topical than ever. At the time of increased “explosion in technologies of sociation” and the increased “consciousness of difference” that follows, the relational approach can, Gergen (2006: 121-122) argues, not only help explain and reveal the constructed nature of what we perceive to be ‘good’ or ‘real’ in the global context, but also the relational nature of our alignments and commitments to various issues. This is particularly relevant in the digital context where polarization of opinion is on the increase and we are witnessing the emergence of ideologically coherent enclaves, some extreme, both online and off. This increased consciousness of difference and access to spaces with potential for multiple voices does not necessarily lead to tolerance or harmonious co-existence, acceptance or modification of opinion (e.g. Papacharissi, 2002).

We are always in multiple and conflicting relationships, these spanning the past and the present, existing as well as imagined, as is demonstrated in the Articles I-IV. While the local relationship generates its own realm of the ‘real’ (Gergen, 2009: 397), and as noted above, may give rise to enclaves of specific orientation, self-construction is no longer limited to specific localities, but instead, the Internet provides global opportunities for relating, offering “a significant boost to how people imagine identity in consumer culture” (Rattle, 2014: 126). This should not be taken to mean, however, that the self is somehow liberated from any possible constraints, but rather, with the increased relational potential, the potential for increased conflict and tension might also rise.

I will next discuss how consumer culture can be seen both as a context and a
relation: consumption not only offers resources and means for self-construction, but also provides a context of operation where such consumption-mediated action is intelligible. I will then explore how media contributes to constructing and circulating shared social imaginaries that offer points of identification, and how these have the potential of entering into relational processes shaping the goals, desires and aspirations of selves in digital contexts. Chapter 3 ends with a discussion of social media.
I have so far discussed how the relational approach to being might help think about self-construction in the digital context as a complex relational and contextual process that is embedded in the wider socio-cultural and economic context. The self thus not only constitutes a site of intersecting, contradictory relations, but moreover, and because of this, can also provide a tool, an analytical lens, for examining the social in the contemporary world (e.g. Couldry, 2000). As relational beings, we interact with our social environment and operate within the framework of our society (Berger & Luckmann, 1987 [1966]; Gergen, 2009).

Societies differ in terms of how their members are stratified. Ours is a consumer society, described by Bauman (1999) as a society that engages its members as consumers (see also Firat & Dholakia, 2016), rather than, for example, as citizens or as producers as in the “producer society” of the industrial phase. As citizens, individuals engage with the community “through economic involvement, public service and other efforts to augment the quality of life for all” (Azzopardi, 2011, emphasis in original), whereas as consumers, individuals engage in and via consumption, that is, “in their capacity as consumers” (Bauman, 1999: 36), this leading to ever-growing inequalities in all areas of life. We see, then, how the emphasis has shifted, not only from production to consumption but also from communality to individuality.

Furthermore, consumption, argues Baudrillard (1998 [1970]: 193, emphasis in original) is “a statement of contemporary society about itself, the way our society speaks itself”. Consumer culture surrounds us, largely mediated by ubiquitous media, but in addition, more and more of our everyday is saturated by images of the everyday consumption choices of the regular individual, for example, through social media. Indeed, while consumer culture theorists Arnould and Thompson (2005: 869, emphasis added) write that consumer culture, with its inherent marketplace ideology, “frames consumers’ horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behaviour and sense-making interpretations more likely than others”, media scholars Deuze, Blank, & Speers (2012: para 3) similarly state how “the whole of the world and our lived experience in it can and perhaps should be seen as framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous media”. It is clear, then, that consumption and the market
as well as the media are implicated in complex ways in how the contemporary self is positioned, and how the self is imagined.

With digital media, the images depicting alternative ways of imagining have both increased and become more diversified. Despite the increasing participation in media of regular people, in reality television (see e.g. Couldry, 2002), online forums (e.g. sites of fandom) or micro celebrity websites (e.g. fashion blogs), some argue that control over the symbolic economy still remains in the hands of media industries (Murthy, 2012). This chapter offers contextualisation to how we might approach contemporary articulations of the relational self as populating digital contexts, positioned against the backdrop of consumption and media, and explore what kinds of relational forces meet at the site of the self.

3.1 Introduction

Consumption, as a complex set of social, cultural and economic practices, is what both defines and drives consumers: these practices are “interconnected with [...] the spread of the market economy, a developing globalisation, the creation and recreation of national traditions, [and] a succession of technological and media innovations” (Sassatelli, 2014: 236). I examine the self from the perspective of consumption as a relational activity as many of the articulations of the contemporary self on social media represent what might be called ‘consumer-incorporated selves’, that is, selves “compromised by marketing ideology” (Halton & Rumbo, 2007: 298), the consuming self entangled with media practices (e.g. recording, posting, (re)sharing, etc.) in complex ways. Therefore, consumption practices provide an entry point into the exploration of how, in our time, the self is imagined, how consumption figures in such imagining, and how the self is constructed in and by the multitude of relations spanning the new media landscape as well as the mediated consumer landscape (Couldry, 2001).

Baudrillard (1998 [1970]: 29) argues that consumption is infiltrating the whole of life, so much so that the mode of consumption constitutes a ‘code’ by which we all communicate, organise and interpret the world around us. With all activities being sequenced ‘in the same combinatorial mode’, the individual becomes defined by way of one’s “combinatorial involvement” in the game of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]: 192). For Baudrillard, there is nothing outside consumption. Similarly, Bauman (1999: 40) sees the consumer society as a producer of social inequalities: in addition to the capacity and willingness to consume, individuals are stratified “along the lines of mobility—the freedom to choose where to be”. Such freedom is dependent on the social position of an individual, being the luxury of the upper elite and the stuff of imagination for others. In a society of consumers, mobility also refers to capabilities of economic, social and cultural mobility, the capacity to be and to become what one desires, and the ability to choose freely (Bauman, 1999). Mobility thus relates to opportunity as well as ability to move in society,
in the labour market, and in the cultural domain, such ‘cultural omnivorousness’
entailing certain elitism and privilege (Bauman, 2004: 96) of the global elite.

Mobility applies to the digital environment, too, which is not more democratic
or equal than our physical, offline realm. First of all, some are more free than oth-
ers to access and utilise (see e.g. Livingstone, 2005; Consalvo & Ess, 2011) as well
as traverse the digital terrains (Lagerkvist, 2016) of the Internet, thereby gaining
access to potentially alternative cultural imaginaries representing divergent social
realities, and second, some more than others have the capacity and means to alter,
modify, or resist existing imaginaries. Neither do people have equal access to cul-
tural resources; in fact, “the cultural resources for self-making and the techniques
for self-production are class processes and making the self makes class” (Skeggs,
2004: 75). Skeggs (Ibid.) maintains that self-making cannot be isolated from the
conditions that make it possible (see also Lawler, 2014), an assumption that un-
derlies the cultural and social theory perspectives that see culture as (potential)
property that can be exchanged (Skeggs, 2004). Arguing that these conditions for
self-making “come into effect through regimes of value”, Skeggs (2011: 496) raises
the question of how are those individuals who are “excluded from the possibilities
of accruing and attaching value to themselves, who are positioned outside of the
dominant symbolic as the constitutional limit for the proper self” going to develop
value. Making the self by way of appropriating cultural capital is at the same time a
way of increasing the exchange value of the self (Skeggs, 2004, 2011). Today, cultural
capital is tightly linked to consumption, but also to media which circulates the com-
mon cultural understandings (e.g. Sumiala & Tikka, 2011) as well as constructing
these (Couldry, 2012), contributing to our norms and desires (McRobbie, 2004).

As media texts are “informed by a larger discursive network ranging from ‘high
culture’ – poetry, novels, paintings – to ‘popular culture’ – commercial television,
music video, theme parks – to political and social processes – social movements,
changes in economic formations, transnational migrations”, they must be viewed
in context, anthropologist Faye Ginsburg (1994: 13) notes. Media texts reflect the
times. Furthermore, not only do the media provide content for the self in the form
of circulated, mediated input, or “raw material” (Bauman, 2004), but also, differ-
ent media act as technologies we engage with, shaping our experience (Grodin &
Lindlof, 1996; Gergen, 1991). Digital media has only ever increased the input, but
we are not to assume that any one media text presents as homogenous to all, and
therefore any one media text will always afford multiple, even oppositional read-
ings. Not only contextual factors, but also the polysemic nature of media texts and
imagery (Gamson et al., 1992) enables divergent readings.

Baudrillard (1998 [1970]) was not only immensely critical of the consumer society,
but also of the media, in particular of how the media and the advertising industry
together construct, manage and manipulate perceptions as well as create false needs
(see Atik & Firat, 2013, for a discussion on marketing as institution). If consump-
tion indeed relies on volatile desire (Bauman, 2001), it needs to be kept going, and
this desire is for a large part fuelled by the advertising industry (see e.g. Campbell,
1987; Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]) that is also quick to offer solutions for problems they invented in the first place (e.g. Featherstone, 2007). It is a complex interplay of advertising, popular culture, and the media that creates and mobilises consumer desires.

However, while advertising does indeed feed our desires and our imagination, the practice of imagining or day-dreaming is not so much created by advertising as advertising is tapping into a pre-existing tendency to imagine (Campbell, 1987), albeit in an effort to evoke desire and create wants. In fact, Campbell (1987: 91) argues that the practice of imagining is “endemic to modern societies and does not require the commercial institution of advertising to ensure its continued existence”. Related to the human ability to envision alternatives (e.g. Gergen, 2009), imagination is a creative activity (see also Castoriadis, 1994): as an act of re-articulation or re-description, imagination is a form of active manipulation of meanings, and as such, imagining is also productive, linked to self-construction and self-improvement.

Consumption as a vehicle for expression of identity, ideology, status, belonging, differentiation, and a host of other functions in the everyday has been widely researched (Bauman, 1999, 2001; Campbell, 1987; Featherstone, 2007; Veblen (1994 [1899]); Baudrillard (1998 [1970]); Bourdieu, 1986a; Firat, 1991; Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Miller, 2012), consumer culture being "deeply implicated in the fabrication of identities" (Sassatelli, 2014: 236; see also McRobbie, 1998, 2004; Gill, 2007a, 2007b; Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). In this thesis, I treat consumption as one of the constitutive relational forces, and furthermore, in order to explore the role of media in this relational matrix, I will draw on the notion of shared social imaginaries (Appadurai, 1996; Taylor, 2002; Castoriadis, 1994; Gaonkar, 2002) to illustrate the complex interplay of consumption and media, on the one hand, and self-imagining and locally shared imaginaries, on the other.

I will next discuss consumer society and the self, approaching consumption as the constitutive other. The discussion then moves on to social imaginaries and how self-imagining has become an everyday project of negotiation. The chapter concludes with a look at social media and how it can be seen as a relational resource for the self.

### 3.2 Consumer society and constitutive relations

Consumer society is said to have emerged due to the Industrial Revolution and the related increased consumer demand on the part of the middle classes, while it has also been attributed to the rise of the leisure class (Veblen, 1994 [1899]) and the increased capacity to spend. However, increased consumption was not only down to excess money, but was also facilitated by cultural changes, including a change in the general attitude toward consuming. Campbell (1987: 2) argues that this attitudinal change was caused by an underlying Romantic ethic, saying that “the ‘romantic’ ingredient in culture [] had a crucial part to play in the development of modern consumerism itself”, rather than the romantic being the product of modern advertising alone (Ibid.).
While arguably saturated with goods and commodities, more than this, however, consumer society is characterised by a particular *manner of using* commodities. Commodities are used “to express the core values of that society but [they] also become the principal form through which people come to see, recognise and understand those values” (Miller, 2012: 40; see also Firat, 1991). Complex symbolic meanings thus become objectified in commodity form (e.g. Miller, 2012), or in specific consumer behaviours and practices of consuming. Consumer culture is thus a complex and multidimensional construct, a “social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets” (Arnould and Thomson, 2005: 869). Clearly, resources of different kinds are not available to everyone in equal measures (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986a, 1986b), and consumer culture tends to highlight and amplify social and economic inequalities by way of evaluating and valuing things, ways of life and articulations of identity. Individuals, as consumers, utilize commercially produced commodities ranging from media texts and images to objects and commodities in the construction of their identities (Firat, 1991; Firat & Venkatesh, 1993), but also in making up practices and meanings in order to collectively make sense of their everyday life. Thus, not only is the consumer subjectivity produced by the market, it is also dependent on it (Firat & Dholakia, 2016).

Due to global flows (e.g. Appadurai, 1990, 1996), the interpretative resources provided by consumer culture go beyond the local, presenting as “a densely woven network of global connections and extensions through which local cultures are increasingly interpenetrated by the forces of transnational capital and the global mediascape” (Arnould & Thomson, 2005: 869; see also Miller, 2012). This is not to say local cultural adaptations of transnational flows, symbolic or material, follow a homogenous pattern, but rather, new meanings are also generated that draw on and fit the existing local culture (Miller, 2012; Cook & Crang, 1996). Nevertheless, it is in this way that consumer culture is linked to social imaginaries (discussed in more detail in the next sub-section) and the changing landscape of aspirations. Global imaginaries mediate consumption-related desires and aspirations and offer varying points of identification (if also points of disidentification) experienced and negotiated at the local level. Such identity possibilities are negotiated and evaluated by processes of alignment and disalignment, offline as well as online; articulations of the self in digital contexts are at the same time articulations of a globalized, commodified self that both draws on as well as adds to popular imaginaries, contributing to the creation of alternative and resistant imaginaries as well as reproducing pre-existing ones.

Consumer subjectivity is thus anchored in the values of consumerist society (see Firat & Dholakia, 2016), and naturally, then, what consumer culture produces is more consumers (Bauman, 2001). In the consumer landscape, “[p]ersonal identity is increasingly sought by the consumer, even in its fragmented forms, and recognized by others, not on the basis of what one produces but on the basis of what
Anu Harju

one consumes” (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993: 235, emphasis added). As changes in practices relate to changes in subjectivity (Firat & Dholakia, 2016), new practices influence not only subjectivity but our imaginative repertoire, too. The link between cultural and technological developments and subjectivity can be seen how, in modern industrialized societies, the citizen subjectivity was generated through the technologies of education, whereas today the dominant technologies for subject formation are “the electronic media, giving rise to a pervasive entertainment industry that affords self-interpretations of people as consumers with flexible identities” (Brinkmann, 2010: 67, emphasis added). Cultural identity is also “reconstituted in global consumer culture” (Edensor, 2002: 28) where the flow of commodities not only draws on but also adds to pre-existing imageries of different people and places (Cook & Crang, 1996). Identity, then, can be seen as a process of “continually weaving together fragments of discourse and images, enactions, spaces and times, things and people into a vast matrix, in which complex systems of relationality between elements constellate around common-sense themes” (Edensor, 2002: 70). Such ‘common-sense’ themes often arise from popular culture in addition to other topical and current cultural, social or political issues. Thus, changes in the cultural terrain shape the available resources for self-interpretation (Brinkmann, 2010; Callero, 2003), even when these are personal and contextual.

Culture, then, has become more and more integrated “into the system of commodity production and circulation” (McGuigan, 1999: 66), and today, culture is commodity as much as commodity is culture (Ibid.). Consumption desires do not only pertain to commodities in the traditional sense, but apply to cultural ‘needs and wants’, too. However, just as culture is not all about luxury (e.g. Williams, 2002 [1958]), likewise the so-called high culture does not rule out commercial interest or motivation, any more than mass culture (or popular culture) necessarily means it lacks radical elements or the potential for it (Eagleton, 2000). This brings us to a point where we can examine popular culture as a domain of negotiation of meanings that go beyond cultural production. While Sumiala & Valaskivi (2014) observe that it is popular culture that constitutes the arena of contestation today, and where cultural struggles are fought (McGuigan, 1999), Eagleton (2000: 105) reminds us that culture, by and large, is “an arena of exceptionally complex moral wrangling” (see also McRobbie, 2004). Indeed, popular culture matters as relations of power are “made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment” (McRobbie, 2004: 262) with popular culture increasingly permeating and being interwoven in the everyday life.

The transformation of traditional society into consumer society heralded a shift into a mode of a “wider and more pervasive production of the self” (Marshall, 2010: 36, emphasis in original), largely led by the celebrity figure that not only embodies the transformative power of consumer culture, also participates “in the field of expectations that many [] have of everyday life” (Turner, 2010: 14). These expectations do not only concern the everyday life, but the self is likewise implicated: the celebrity displays the body that is managed, disciplined and improved, but also lifestyles, tastes, and
opinions (Featherstone, 2007), shaping and adding to social imaginaries and fields of aspirations: consumption has come not only to express identity but also perform it (Sassatelli, 2014). In our media-saturated consumer society, the celebrity enjoys a privileged status. By having both access to various cultural forms and the knowledge of how to use these, the vast symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 1986b) renders the celebrity a symbolic authority (Driessens, 2013). Driessens (2013: 543) articulates ‘celebrity capital’ as “accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations”, placing emphasis on media’s role in constructing and sustaining the celebrity. I will return to this point in the next sub-section.

While celebrity influence may be put to various uses, philanthropy included (however, see Nickel, 2012, for celebrity philanthropy as a form of government of the self), on a more implicit level the celebrity influence can be recovered as embedded in shared social imaginaries where celebrity taste, preferences or ideological leanings permeate individual consumer’s practices of imagining. By emulating the lifestyles and taste of celebrities, the ‘common consumer’ may desire to attain some of that which the celebrity has or stands for (e.g. Nickel & Eikenberry, 2013), or perhaps they wish to become a ‘micro celebrity’ (Senft, 2013) themselves by engaging in efforts to access celebrity subjectivity (e.g. fashion bloggers). The idea of emulation is not new, however, as Veblen (1994 [1899]) already in the late 19th century described the desire of people of lower classes to emulate the tastes of those deemed of higher status, sometimes called the Veblen Effect (see Campbell, 1987, for criticism; see also Trigg, 2001). The celebrity-commodity is thus consumed for various ends and by way of a range of fan practices; in the process the celebrity acquires meanings that extend beyond the celebrity’s control (and even beyond their death), becoming highly personalised (discussed in Articles II and III).

Moreover, celebrity status is no longer confined to the arena of sports (e.g. Sarrimo, 2015), or entertainment and popular culture, but politicians like Barack Obama (Redmond, 2010) or business leaders like Steve Jobs (Watt, 2016) readily undergo celebrification (Driessens, 2012), too. As inspirational speakers and charismatic leaders, celebrities like Steve Jobs (see Streeter, 2015) and Obama are able to offer disenfranchised individuals hope and the opportunity for imagined communion, a sense of togetherness, and a promise of solidity and rootedness (Redmond, 2010), particularly in the current times of economic uncertainty and liquid existence (Bauman, 2000, 2001). Such ‘liquid celebrity’ not only embodies the American success myth but also embodies “the floating nature of capitalism in the global age” (Redmond, 2010: 83), able to affectively engage and captivate the audience all the time reassuring them.

Consuming celebrities is thus saturated with affect (Sandvoss, 2005) and differential affective engagement can be read as a sign of different kind of relational affinity (see e.g. Sointu, 2015): consumption, more generally, is an emotionally invested practice, and Illouz (2009: 337, emphasis added) argues that the conceptual link that explains the articulation between emotion and consumption is “the notion of ‘imagination’, understood as the socially situated deployment of
cultural fantasies”. Consumption desires thus mobilise all three, emotion, the body, and the imagination (see also Howard, 2016). Campbell (1987), too, noted how imagination affords consumers not only control over pleasurable experiences but also a wider range of these as imagination is potentially unrestricted, and not necessarily needing physical stimuli to evoke acts of imagining. Importantly, imagined scenarios elicit emotional states, and Illouz (2009: 397) continues that “emotions [] are experienced on the imaginary mode”.

Celebrities are able to tap into this emotional and imaginary potential, able to produce social cohesion and invite to community by offering a shared affective experience that produces an illusion, or a sense, of community. Experience, argues Burkitt (2014) is a relational configuration, just as emotion emerges as a result of certain pattern of relationships. Consumption offers a way of joining in and becoming affected. Importantly, celebrity consumption does not have to be of material mode (e.g. celebrity paraphernalia) as celebrities are consumed for the symbolic meanings they are able to construct, embody and evoke. Moreover, Redmond notes, “such imagined strengthening of the self, and of the consumerist world, is the exact way in which liquid celebrity and liquid modernity manages to ensure that it holds the imaginary or mythical centre together” (2010: 94). Seeking pleasure via emotional states (rather than via physical, sensory stimulus) evoked by imagining is, according to Campbell (1987), characteristic of modern-day tendency for pleasure-seeking, integral to consumption.

Consumerism in its present-day form is “free from functional bonds” (Bauman, 2001: 12), existing for the sole purpose of itself rather than existing to satisfy needs. The volatile desire (Bauman, 2001) behind consumption is constantly changing, mobilising various imaginaries and evoking emotion linked to consumption experience (Illouz, 2009; Howard, 2016). How consumption is embedded in and mediated by social imaginaries as collective aspirations, and how the media participates in the construction and distribution of imaginaries will be discussed next.

3.3 Social imaginaries as terrain of aspirations

In this section, I will first discuss how the social imaginary can be conceptualised and how it relates to self-construction, after which I will bring up the role the media and popular culture play in constructing such shared spaces of aspiration. I then discuss media power in conjunction with the celebrity system and the production of gendered subjectivities, both also tightly linked to consumer culture.

It is increasingly through media that we imagine we belong to the social world; media connects us to the world by allowing us to participate in it (Couldry, 2003; Sumiala, 2010). Baudrillard (1998 [1970]: 34), however, criticised how instead of reality, the media gives us “the dizzying whirl of reality”, this whirl connecting the experiences of the everyday to those of the world and rendering individuals from passive spectators into active participants. Participation in acts of collective focus
on ‘events’, such as media events (e.g. Couldry, 2002), collective public mourning of popular figures (e.g. Couldry, 1999; McGuigan, 2000; Bell & Taylor, 2016) or other celebrity ‘news’ (Couldry, 2003; Pantti & Sumiala, 2009; Sumiala, 2013) gives us a sense of belonging and sharing, and such a sense of participation may temporarily help alleviate feelings of exclusion and alienation (Bauman, 2004). Yet, at the same time, in addition to media circulating such content, media as “institutionalised structures, forms, formats and interfaces” (Couldry, 2012: viii) are engaged in the active production of symbolic content, and in this way the media participates in the very construction of imaginaries, shaping how we imagine our social worlds.

It has been argued that in contemporary social life imagination has an increasingly central role, even constituting a social practice (Appadurai, 1996) that now concerns everyone and no longer is the privilege of the elite. Imagination has moved beyond fantasy or pastime to something that figures in the production of the self. In conceptualising this new mode of imagining, Appadurai (1996: 31, emphasis added) brought together the ideas of mechanically produced images, that of the imagined community, and “the French idea of the imaginary (imaginaire) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations”, all mediated through the “complex prism of modern media”. Social imaginaries enable, “through making sense of, practices of a society” (Taylor, 2002: 91) and are thus multifarious in order to account for differences among societies: Indeed, Taylor (2002) emphasises the multiplicity and diversity of social imaginaries and their role in divergent understanding of today’s experience and social existence. As imaginaries are also reflections of the times, the constitutive dimensions of the imaginary correspond to different dimensions of global cultural processes: these, according to Appadurai (1990: 296), are ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, and financescapes.

All these global flows contribute to how we imagine: crucially, Anderson (2006 [1983]) argues, imagination is shaped by varying technologies. Thus, when he coined the term ‘imagined community’ to explain how nations come to be and how they are conceived of by way of imagining, he paid attention to what they were imagined as being like and what the influencing factors on this process were. For Anderson, nations are imagined as communities limited by scope, but also imagined as different from other communities; what contributes in these imagined constructions are, for example, technologies of representation and ways of classification, such as maps, census, or identity categories that guide, enable or constrain how communities can be imagined. In addition, institutional media, such as national newspapers and television, and today increasingly also social media, all have a crucial role in constructing the nation as an imagined community, illustrating “the extent to which national routines are enmeshed in the media” (Edensor, 2002: 97). Similarly, the everyday routines at the level of the individual are organised and shaped by the surrounding media landscape.

Imagination has secured its position to such an extent that it has become a “constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (Appadurai, 1996: 3; Bauman, 2004). Eagleton (2000), however, is critical of the easiness with which imagination provides
Anu Harju

access to identities by way of not having one and sees this as problematic: while imagination is everywhere and everything, it is also nowhere and nothing, “feeding parasitically off the life-forms of others, yet transcendent of these life-forms in its very self-effacing capacity to enter into each of them in turn” (Eagleton: 2000: 45). Able to assume multiple identities with ease, imagination is like a ‘shape shifter’ and thus, “less an identity in itself than a knowledge of all identities, and so even more of an identity in the act of being somewhat less” (Eagleton, 2000: 46). This underlines the fluidity (Bauman, 2000) of contemporary being, and the mediated world only ever multiplies the range of possible selves by way of presenting a growing number of alternative imagined communities and by exposing individuals to more extensive array of meanings available for the construction of identity than before (Callero, 2003). The social imaginary thus has the capacity to render us “agents who traverse a social space and inhabit a temporal horizon, entertain certain beliefs and norms, engage in and make sense of our practices in terms of purpose, timing, and appropriateness, and exist among other agents” (Sumiala and Tikka, 2011: 255; Gaonkar, 2002).

Increasingly, we engage in imagining and seeking similar others (Markham, 2012b), imagined as engaged in the same media practices as us which gives rise to a sense of community (Sumiala and Tikka, 2011). Media contexts offering such an experience of togetherness form ‘a symbolic matrix’ that frames how people imagine their social life (Sumiala & Tikka, 2011); however, circulation (e.g. Sumiala, 2011; Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014) of media content representing the same event from different perspectives also creates opportunities for ‘multiplicity of shared experiences’ (Sumiala & Korpiola, 2015) as we identify with divergent imagined communities, while representations of events likewise discursively construct multiple points of alignment and affinity (e.g. Martin, 2004). Mediated imaginaries can help negotiate hopes regarding the future, or help deal with the uncertainty and instability of the present (Bauman, 2001, 2004) as well as negotiate feelings of ‘existential security’ in digital spaces (Lagerkvist, 2016).

Indeed, as argued by Appadurai (1996: 31), imagination has evolved into “a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility”, these fields, largely constructed by various media technologies (see e.g. Bauman, 1992). Also, while landscapes of imagined opportunity may be accessible to many, mobility in terms of Bauman’s (2004) opportunity for economic, social, and cultural mobility are more limited, perhaps increasing the appeal of the imaginary. Many are acutely aware that what the mediated social imagination represents ultimately remains out of their reach (Bauman, 2004), being instead populated by the global cultural elite.

Popular culture has secured its position as the site of cultural meanings, with popular culture and entertainment being tightly interwoven with consumption and identity (e.g. Edensor, 2002); meanings produced by popular culture circulate in the media as flows of competing imageries, while media are also effective in circulating cultural practices. Not limited to the dispersal of economic capital, globalisation also
entails the appropriation of cultural practices (Weedon, 2004), which in turn shape ‘self-imagining’ (Appadurai, 1996). Thus, the social imaginary does not present as a fixed terrain of aspirations, but the field of aspirations fluctuates reflecting both global and local social, cultural, political and economic conditions and currents. This certain situatedness has consequences for what is imagined as constituting the imaginaries, and where and what the constitutive difference is imagined to be. Underlying imagining of alternatives is a conception of what kinds of expectations are reasonable and the normative notions attached to such expectations (Taylor, 2002; Brinkmann, 2010).

As our expectations and images of ‘the good life’ today are increasingly “mediated mundanely through entertainment and popular media discourses” (McGuigan, 2000: 5), to account for the increased influence of popular culture in contemporary imagining, McGuigan (2000) proposes the notion of ‘cultural public sphere’ to complement (or, as he notes, to exist in a state of heteroglossia) the political public sphere. The cultural public sphere includes popular culture and entertainment, and “the routinely mediated emotional and aesthetic reflections on how we live and imagine the good life” (McGuigan, 2000: 5). A further division is suggested by Pullen (2011), who proposes that the notion ‘public sphere of images’ should be considered in order to adequately account for participation in the public sphere insofar as this takes place in and through imagery, with digital media rapidly replacing print media. She notes, however, that such public sphere of images is equally characterised by tensions between democratic interaction and commercialism, although counterpublics often also emerge as a result of such tensions. Issues of access and equal participation have not been removed with the march of images, but rather the ability to read and interpret images has sprung up as a new challenge.

The ability to interpret media texts has always been an issue with digital media challenging media literacy skills even more; yet another issue is the ‘universalizing’ force of media discourse on how we conceptualise and talk about the world, and how such “influences get embedded in further practices that contribute to the organization of the world” (Couldry, 2012: 65). As one form of media’s power (e.g. Couldry, 2001, 2012), it is in this way that media ‘prescribe social reality’ (Couldry, 2012). However, it is important to remember that not only do media representations shape our understandings, but similarly not being represented shapes our sense of ourselves and our social world, by being left out from the range of representations (Giovanelli & Ostertag, 2009). Exclusion has a limiting effect on the interpretative repertoire people draw on, influencing our perception of how the social reality is represented.

It thus follows that media power concerns not only what is in the media, but equally what is not in the media. Consequently, one place where media power is clearly visible is embodied in the celebrity, interlinked with and deeply embedded in consumer culture. The celebrity serves to construct the hierarchy that exists between “media people and nonmedia” people (Couldry, 2002: 289), and it is here that media’s power shows up, in their role as determining matters of inclu-
sion and exclusion (Couldry, 2004). While media undoubtedly has a central role in constructing and producing the celebrity, media as the “authoritative source of social representations” (Couldry, 2002: 28) is not readily observed, in the case of celebrity (or otherwise), nor widely contested. Media, however, continuously reproduce the idea that celebrity antics require our attention (Couldry, 2004) by covering celebrities and providing them with media visibility.

Celebrity culture (see Driessens, 2012; Hollander, 2010; see also Couldry & Markham, 2007; Couldry, 1999) is very pervasive in our culture; in addition to the obvious participants of the media and the celebrity, celebrity culture extends to encompass also its critics (discussed in Article IV), the audience the celebrity system produces (Marshall, 2006) and varying degrees of celebrity fandom (Article II illustrating fandom as ‘sacred consumption’). All of this involves a range of cultural practices (Article III illustrating commemorative practices of celebrity fans) interwoven in complex ways with consumption and self-making.

Characteristic of the contemporary mediatized society, the celebrity has become socially and culturally embedded to such a degree that the very notion of celebrity is changing, even becoming democritised to a degree as today even ordinary people undergo ‘celebrification’ (Driessens, 2012; see also Couldry, 2002). The transformation of the regular individual to celebrity, or micro-celebrity (Senft, 2013; Marwick, 2013), is becoming more common, while fan-celebrity identification motives and interaction practices are becoming more diverse in the social media context (Soukup, 2006; Click, Lee & Holladay, 2013). While celebrification can be viewed as a desire to be in the media (see Couldry, 2002) and therefore an indication of a desire to attain media visibility either in the traditional sense of attention or access to public discourse via celebrity identification, and thereby recognition in society (see e.g. Soukup, 2006), this also points to the changing role of the media as “the generator or author of social identity/ies” (Turner, 2010: 18); thus, not only institutional media, but increasingly social media, too, produces celebrities, and many a ‘YouTuber’ today represents an updated version of the entrepreneur-come-millionaire. Presence on social media can also be interpreted as a desire to reach a wider audience for matters and goals other than popularity, fame, or financial gain, the usual hallmarks of celebrity (Hollander, 2010): indeed, social media broadcasting also constitutes a form of social action, as demonstrated by blogging (e.g. Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht, 2004; Connell, 2013; see also Article I in this thesis).

Thus, although the media landscape has diversified with social media, it is still unclear whether this only serves to increase media’s power (Couldry, 2012) as media logics spread and are adopted and reproduced by ordinary people (Turner, 2010). The issue concerns whether media logics of, for example, visibility and celebrity commodity (e.g. Nickel & Eikenberry, 2013) are infiltrating our conception and governance of the self (Nickel, 2012); in fact, Turner (2010: 18, emphasis added) asks whether the “notions of media visibility, of recognition through the establishment of the celebrity-commodity, or of access to Couldry’s ‘media centre’ (2000),
are becoming embedded in *our culture’s repertoire of understandings of what it is to be a subject*, what constitutes identity and what kinds of performance of identity might be desirable” (see also Marshall, 2006). The ‘sacred centre of media’ refers to “the social construction of centralised media [] as our central access point to the ‘central realities’ of the social world, whatever they are” (Couldry, 2006: 178). Couldry (2001, 2006, 2012), who has repeatedly discussed the myth (see Couldry, 2004) of the mediated centre that frames and rationalizes how we access and see the social, anticipates that should such a mediated centre continue to exist, it would likely become entertainment-centric. As centre implies and is relative to periphery, such mediated centre also implies the existence of such a periphery that falls outside the mediated centre’s representation.

It is clear that the celebrity produces a polarised landscape of engagement where some are emotionally captivated while others are deeply repelled, and thus we should not assume celebrity culture is endorsed by everyone (Couldry, 2004; Driessens, 2012), or that it figures in people’s articulations of their identities (however, see McGuigan, 2000, on national identity and celebrity) in equal measures. The celebrity system is, nevertheless, an illustration of how media as institutional power circulates images and cultural notions of appropriate behaviours, identities, and tastes, which the celebrity mediates (but also ‘bad taste’ or inappropriate behaviour).

In a similar fashion, in addition to the (re)production of consumer subjectivity, the media are implicated in (re)producing gendered subjectivities (e.g. Skeggs, 2004; Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 1998, 2004). Some of this media environment is constituted by user-generated (UG) content and imagery, often mimicking hegemonic discourses, and like magazines, this imagery likewise provides a “manual for the production of desirable femininity” (Gill, 2007a: 186), thereby functioning as a normative interpretative resource for the gendered self. Gill (2007a) argues that while alternative representations may exist, the variety of femininities displayed in media texts nevertheless serves to mask the deeper ideological nature of women’s magazines, which is based on the understanding that women should nevertheless be evaluated on appearances, not skills or achievements.

Embedded in such normative understandings is ‘thin as ideal’, which, for example, plus-sized fashion bloggers actively seek to resist (discussed in Article I). Plus-sized fashion bloggers are subverting existing power relations by way of appropriating the fashion discourses that exclude them as subjects, making visible the power relations inherent in the fashion realm. At the same time, they engage in media practices that *include* them as visible subjects in the media landscape.

While constituting cultural texts, magazines are also a “means of selling highly specific blocks of consumers to advertisers” (Gill, 2007a: 181), with advertising comprising such a high proportion of media texts that it no longer stands out. Not only does this raise the important issue of the political economy of media vis-à-vis consumers as viewers/readers sold as ‘audience commodity’ (e.g. Smythe, 1977, 1994; Fuchs, 2012) to advertisers (see e.g. Comor, 2011; Fuchs & Dyer-Witheford, 2012; Fuchs, 2014b for discussion of digital labour), it also highlights the increa-
ing amount of commercial material in our immediate (media) environment and the abundance of points of identification offered by media texts.

Thus, a mutually constitutive relation exists between what is included and what is excluded, with certain representations being normalised, against which others are constituted as lacking. For example, ‘being fat’ is regularly defined by way of a lack: lack of self-discipline, lack of education, or, for example, lack of good taste (LeBesco, 2004). Thus, by doing taste and participating in specific ‘taste regimes’ (Arsel & Bean, 2013), subjects occupying a marginalised position (e.g. plus-sized fashionistas) may aim to attain a more socially sanctioned subject position. Yet, doing taste is at the same time also about doing class (Skeggs, 2004), as often it is those in power, the elite, who have the power to decide what constitutes good taste. Furthermore, LeBesco (2004) argues that being fat is excluded from such elitist definition of what falls within good taste, the ‘state of being fat’ often seen as a disability or a deviance, and ‘becoming fat’ equalling a lack of control and self-discipline.

The refusal or inability “to participate in middle-class taste culture” (Skeggs, 2004: 91) is, moreover, often seen as an “individualized moral fault”, pathologised as deviant from the norm, valued as less, and often defined as a personal failure or a lack (see also Lawler, 2014). Due to the middle-class taste being normalised, including when it comes to the preferred self, consumption as the mechanism of self-construction can be seen, on the one hand, as a privileged class-related activity, yet on the other hand, as indicative of the possible motives for engaging in consumption as a way of realising the self being rooted in the desire to become a more culturally intelligible and ‘included’ subject, as positioned against the backdrop of the consumer society where certain characteristics are valued more than others and constructed as such in various imaginaries. Yet, the symbolic content harboured in imaginaries does not necessarily have to be positive and affirming, just as the imagined communities they are involved in constructing may not be formed around hope and aspiration but also, for example, death and violence (see e.g. Sumiala, 2011; Sumiala & Tikka, 2011, for circulation of violence).

Social imaginaries are cultural terrains of conceived possibility (and reverse, what falls outside the possible) and collective aspiration; it is the cultural dimension that makes imaginaries good soil for creativity. Williams (2002 [1958]) argues that culture is at the same time both traditional and creative; people, as members of a given culture, are acculturated to the known meanings and are therefore also provided with opportunities for making new meanings in creative ways, manifest for example in the counterpublics we observe in our mediated world that expose power dynamics (e.g. Connell, 2013). Insisting that culture resides in ordinary matters of the everyday life, Williams (2002 [1958]: 93) saw culture as “a whole way of life – the common meanings” as much as it is “the arts and learning – the special processes of discovery and creative effort”, and as such culture belongs to everyone.

This notion of culture is a more egalitarian one, yet, culture can also be seen as a matter of preference and power relations: Bauman (1990: 144-145) points out
how culture “not only promotes [] an artificial order, but also evaluates it”, all the
time being “an activity which some people perform on others”, being in this way a
form of power and control. The normative dimension of culture, popular culture
and entertainment, high art, and so on, carries over to the imaginary and adds an
evaluative layer to imagining.

In effect, imaginaries are collective constructions that come with social and sym-
bothic power and guide self-interpretation by providing an evaluative framework for
the interpretative processes (see also Couldry, 2014). González-Vélez (2002: 349)
defines the social imaginary as “discursive structures that articulate the framing
of social forms, affecting subjects’ understanding of themselves, their practices,
and the places they occupy in society”, yet Brinkmann (2010: 66) underlines the
role of material practices and technologies in constructing and maintaining social
imaginaries, emphasising that neither the social imaginary or the related self-
interpretations are dependent only on “vocabularies and symbolic discourses”. As
stated earlier, imaginaries are social practices (Appadurai, 1996) that are driven
by normative expectations (Taylor, 2002).

We can now see how imagining is a culturally and relationally constrained field
of conceivable action where conceivable action is a socially situated variable. In a
society of consumers, and in terms of Bauman’s notion of mobility, conceivable
action presents very differently depending of one’s social position. Having fewer
resources means having less power over one’s dreams and aspirations to the effect
that these need to be moderated (Bauman, 1990).

Next, I will discuss different approaches to social media, and how we can approach
the digital context from a relational perspective.

3.4 Social media as techno-cultural construct

Social media platforms are dynamic constructs, changing in accordance to not
only users’ but owners’ objectives (van Dijck, 2013a). Therefore, social practices
and platforms can in this respect be seen as mutually constitutive. The affordances
and/or constraints they place on sociality are continuously shifting, and hence,
the relational capacity is far from static or predictable. Just as the Internet is but
“one constituent of a historically evolving media environment” (Jensen, 2011: 43),
social media represents but one social and technological construct in a larger media
ecosystem, the online ecosystem being “embedded in a larger sociocultural and
political-economic context where it is inevitably molded by historical circumstances”
(van Dijck, 2013a: 9). Social media, then, as one type of communication media,
functions as a site for networking, organising, interaction, identity expression, in-
formation sharing, as well as memory construction and memorising. Furthermore,
instead of thinking about social media in terms of platforms, social media can be
thought of in terms of the content posted on and shared in these platforms (Miller
et al., 2016), resulting in new ways of sociality, that is, of forming social relations.
As social media exists in a continuum of different media across time with each media facilitating different forms of sociality, thinking in terms of ‘scalable sociality’ (Miller et al., 2016) we can cover both existing social media and the traditional media, but also the potential, future forms of new media, emphasising the social function of media in facilitating human connection, and the affordances of any given media as scalable in relation to one another (for scalability and networked publics, see boyd, 2011). In a similar vein, Jensen (2011: 43) emphasises embeddedness, suggesting we view the Internet in terms of ‘a configuration of media of three degrees’, where humans are likewise considered to constitute media. Like Miller et al. (2016), this model offers a historical perspective as it is embedded in the new. Media of the first degree are rooted in the “socially formed resources that enable human beings to articulate an understanding of reality” (Jensen, 2011: 45), in short, verbal language like speech, whereas media of the second degree are related to technological mass production (radio and TV, printed books), and finally, media of the third degree are digital forms of representation, interaction, and often combinations of media of first and second degree all in one platform. Different media are thus understood as distinctive from each other in their “modalities of expression and institutional arrangements” (Jensen, 2011: 45), however, overlapping in a process of remediation (see, e.g. Bolter & Grusin, 1999) and recycling of material.

So while digital media are the order of the day (e.g. Markham, 2017), it is nevertheless but one stage in the historical continuum of media and even today expresses a wide range of user behaviour (Miller et al., 2016), encompassing features and characteristics recycled from old media. Indeed, such a relational approach to media and media texts helps us see the connections, but also the differences, among different media. With each media having its own purpose, affordances and modalities, the ability to choose among the multiple media appropriately relative to one’s goal can be seen as a sign of socialisation “within a particular historical and social context of communication” (Jensen, 2011: 46).

While it is important to situate social media in its historical context, the term ‘social’ itself warrants critical assessment: when some media is called social, it carries the implication “that there are other media that are perhaps anti-social, or even not social at all— asocial, [inviting] comparisons between media based on how social each medium is” (Papacharissi, 2015: 1), whereas each medium caters to distinct forms of social behaviour. Furthermore, the term ‘social media’ tends to blur the corporate logic behind new media by focussing on “what people do through platforms rather than critical issues of ownership, rights, and power” (Baym, 2015: 1). Sociality and the act of connecting with others are ultimately properties of culture, not only a feature of new media (van Dijck, 2013a; Baym, 2015).

The Internet, in itself, offers various options for interactivity, and social media combines interactivity with unrestricted temporality in its capacity for synchronous (in addition to asynchronous) interaction without spatial restrictions (see e.g. boyd & Ellison, 2008). The term ‘new media’ is often used as an umbrella term denoting communication technologies that employ new digital technologies, for example,
the Internet which in itself hosts a variety of different types of media channels. However, as ‘new’ as ‘new media technologies’ are, Gitelman (2008: 6) reminds us that any new media, throughout history, “is never entirely revolutionary: new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such”. Likewise, as McLuhan (1994 [1964]) famously said, the content of any medium is already another medium, each new medium encompassing and representing the old medium.

Baym (2010: 7; see also boyd, 2009) offers seven concepts that characterise different media in varying degrees, such categorisation intended to help distinguish media from each other, but also to separate mediated communication from face-to-face communication. These are mobility, interactivity, temporal structure, social cues, storage, replicability, and reach. Naturally, these aspects have consequences for social interaction and personal relationships, with different media differing from each other in more ways than regards their sociability.

While Baym (2010) stresses the more technical characteristics of what different media are like and what they can do and allow the users to do, boyd (2011: 39, emphasis added) approaches social media from the perspective of “networked publics”, that is, publics “restructured by networked technologies”, stating that these simultaneously constitute “(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice”. While the affordances of networked publics do not dictate the behaviour of the participants directly, they do however configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement. In essence, then, the architecture of a particular environment matters and has an effect on how people form and negotiate relationships. However, as in all social interaction, online or offline, contextual factors always affect the relational outcome, and thus the constraints and affordances view would fall under general considerations of the social context.

Anderson’s (2006 [1983]) notion of ‘imagined community’ has inspired work on ‘imagined audience’ on social media. Marwick and boyd (2010), for example, have explored social media users’ techniques in handling communicating with what they (following Anderson) call a large imagined audience online; they note that in addition to mobilising self-commodification practices, such as ‘micro-celebrity’ (see also Senft, 2013) and other personal branding strategies (see also Duffy & Hund, 2015), users are effective navigators of what Marwick and boyd (2010) call ‘collapsed contexts’. Collapsed context is related to the notion of invisible audience (boyd, 2009): while invisible audience obscures who we are talking to or with, making it near impossible to assess the audience and adjust accordingly, collapsed context refers to the way social media technologies collapse multiple contexts together as the social media ‘text’ can be read very differently in different contexts by different people at different times. Thus, what may be appropriate in one, perhaps the original context may be inappropriate in some other context.

Indeed, the way Internet technologies reconfigure time and space (see Tsatsou, 2009) as well as the ways in which it caters to anonymous participation and interac-
tion makes it a distinct environment (Markham, 2004b). Marwick and boyd (2010) argue that users engaged in many-to-many communication (e.g. Twitter) resort to an imagined audience seen as emerging from the communicative content (e.g. tweets) to combat the effects of the invisible and networked audience. However, this view is not radically different from the view generally held in linguistics that in addition to contextual factors, what is called a ‘putative reader’ (see e.g. Martin, & Rose, 2003; Thompson, 2013) is inevitably constructed in any one text (as I show in Article IV; and so is opposition), even if there may be differential engagement even within a text (see e.g. Martin, 2004), text understood in the wider sense.

However, the purpose of the imagined audience, Marwick and boyd (2010) maintain, is to guide both appropriate communicative behaviour and appropriate self-presentation (on imagined audience, see also Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). However, both notions place emphasis on the technological configuration of the user-audience interaction and the related communication management strategies. Imagined audience thus orients the analysis toward the communicative practices of the users relative to their perceived audience from the perspective of managed practices, and context collapse in turn implies the effects of the communicative setting on the communicative event, its management as well as its subsequent interpretation, which within the relational framework can be viewed in terms of relational, contextual response (of both communicator and interpreter) to that which flows in the relationship.

What I am interested in is the relational flow that influences the users’ articulations of the self in digital contexts before, outside and surrounding the discursive event of self-construction on social media, enabling and constraining our possibilities for imagining how and what to be, what to do, or where to ‘travel’ (Bauman, 1999). It is thus better suited for the purposes of this study to approach social media in the fashion suggested by van Dijck (2013a: 28) who sees social media both as a ‘techno-cultural construct’ (users, content and technology) and a configuration of ‘socioeconomic structures’ (governance, business models, socioeconomic power struggles between users and owners, for example). The multi-dimensional model comprises altogether six constitutive elements, of which van Dijck (2013a: 41) explains that it is the relations and connections between these elements, rather than the constituents themselves, that help explain and explore the construct that is social media. As this study is concerned with how the self is positioned in today’s changing world at the intersection of consumer culture and new media, we can locate the focus of inquiry in the first dimension of van Dijck’s model, where social media as a sociotechnical and sociocultural construct allows for the social construction of the relational self (see Markham, 2004b, 2017) in the contemporary digital context.

Articulating the self is in any case temporally, spatially, socially and historically constrained (e.g. Weedon, 2004), and social media companies aim to establish “a new normative order for online socializing and communication“ (van Dijck, 2013: 65) as platforms shape sociality and re-define what it means to connect, to share, and to befriend. Media technologies, then, shape how we are together, with the
“so-called social media enhanc[ing] a particular type of sociability—networked sociability” (Papacharissi, 2011: 317).

In addition to the technological or socio-cultural perspectives, philosophical takes on digital media have recently emerged. Lagerkvist (2016, 2014, 2013), for example, suggests that an existential dimension be considered in digital media research, stating that “digital media are existential media, also and particularly when people share and explore existential issues in connection with loss and trauma online” (2016: 2), continuing that questions pertaining to digital technologies are also “questions about human existence”. How we negotiate our social positioning, construct our sense of self and make sense of the social world around us are likewise profound issues the digital adds another dimension to. We thus need to understand digital contexts as embedded in and interconnected with the offline, with online practices being informed by and entangled with those offline (e.g. Hine, 2008; Campbell, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012); furthermore, online social spaces, like YouTube, can sometimes function as primary (not secondary) social spaces for negotiation of togetherness (Gibson, 2016), illustrating the social function of new media practices of sharing.

It is worth remembering that many of the media practices we engage with daily are relatively new, for example ‘searching’ (using a search engine), sharing, connecting, and posting, or what Couldry (2012: 47) calls ‘showing’, an act of making something public via media, from tweets to blog posts to YouTube videos. Approaching media practices (see e.g. Couldry, 2004, 2012; Postill, 2010, for media as practice approach) as social practices from a dialogic perspective allows us to view media use as social action, a form of situated discursive action where a shared social reality is constructed as “the emergent product of local discursive action”; thus, media texts, in addition to being material objects, also act as “subjects dispersed throughout social discourse” and enter into ‘imaginative constructions of the self” (Lindlof & Grubb-Swetnam, 1996: 184-185). Consequently, media texts on social media are not merely digital products: they enter into relationships not only with a host of other texts, but also with temporally and spatially dispersed individuals, shaping the construction of the self.

Digital artefacts as articulations of the self, from uploaded photos to blog posts to videos, enter into relationships with other artefacts in the digital space forming chains of significations, but they also enter into imaginative constructions of the self. It is in this way that the digital articulations of the self enter into imaginaries, shaping them as well as being shaped by them.

We see, then, that social media has the potential (see Baym, 2015) to increase the range of different views, and pluralism generally “encourages both scepticism and innovation and is thus inherently subversive of the taken for granted reality of the traditional status quo” (Berger & Luckmann, 1987 [1966]: 141-143) as it brings in more voices creating a more diverse ideological playground. Similarly, marginalised groups have grasped the capacity of social media spaces for subversive action and the potential these offer to challenge the hegemonic understandings. Berger &
Luckmann (1987 [1966]: 140) underline how “traditional definitions of reality inhibit social change”; the relational opportunities provided by digital communications technology may be, and perhaps should be, used to challenge prevailing understandings and instigate social change and issues of equality (Baym, 2015) as well as encourage political engagement (e.g. Manning, 2014).

3.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have elaborated on the interplay of consumption and the media and how these, entangled with shared imaginaries and complex social practices, shape the self. I have also discussed various takes on social imaginaries, and how treating these as normative cultural frameworks allows us to examine the ways in which consumption and consumerist values infiltrate our notion of self and the practices of imagining as well as articulating the self. Social media as a site of contemporary articulations of the self was discussed, but also how it constitutes a relational force: as a part of the ever-expanding media landscape, social media as a site of cultural production is entangled in the production, modification and contestation of social imaginaries.

Furthermore, I argued that adopting a relational view to the self renders issues regarding authenticity vis-à-vis online/offline identity arising from the traditional binary view on modes of being redundant, while at the same time it allows taking into account the diverse factors influencing identity construction as we treat the online as embedded in the offline and acknowledge the interconnectedness of practices in these realms. Gergen (2009) conceptualises the self as a multi-being with an enormous potential for action that originates not only from current relationships but also from those in the person’s past (see also Berger & Luckmann, 1987 [1966]), including mythological and fictive characters. This extends to include potential future relations as they are imagined, including relationships with celebrities, popular and famous figures, and so on.

In the next chapter, I will present the conceptual framework of the study and present an alternative account on how to view articulations of the relational self in digital contexts as negotiated relational outcomes resulting from intersections of contemporary social and cultural forces of the present-day consumer society. To do this, I suggest we approach shared social imaginaries, first, as semiotic systems that have the capacity to order and organize, and second, as normative frameworks able to assign value and thus create relational tension. I will elaborate on the dynamics of the relational matrix in terms of relations of inclusion and exclusion negotiated at the site of the self.
4 The conceptual framework of the study: web of (conflicting) relations

“To live in a society means to live in a world of imaginary signification”
(Bouchet, 1994: 408).

This chapter develops the conceptual framework of this study. In order to elaborate on the complex intersecting relational forces meeting at the site of the self, I draw on the previously discussed theoretical approaches to consumption, media and the self; to examine the interconnectedness of these and how the self is positioned in the contemporary society, I will examine the constitutive relations of the relational being through the lens of the social imaginary. The empirical research of this thesis is presented in the individual research articles in Part II; in Part I, I re-examine the empirical studies from the perspective of relationality. I thus conceptualise the social imaginary as a semiotic system in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the complexity of ‘being online’ and the potential tensions arising from intersecting relational forces negotiated at the site of the self.

As laid out in chapter 2, I view ‘being’ as a relational and dialectic social construct, whereby the person is conceptualised as “the common intersection of multiple relations” (Gergen, 2011b: 317). Social media and the digital context add another dimension to being, and a relational perspective can help theorise selves in social media, where in addition to serving as a site of articulation of the self (or multiple selves) suspended in multiple relations, social media also functions as a relational resource, increasing the potential relational input.

When drawing up my conceptual framework, I have tried to keep in mind the following words: “While theoretical work can sometimes transform an area of study [], excessive theoretical elaboration can also stand in the way of less ‘exciting’ but essential empirical work” (Couldry, 2000: 14). Thus, in what follows, I have tried to make my thoughts clear and limit the discussion of, for example, semiotics, to that which is relevant, with illustrations from the empirical research of the thesis that I hope illuminate the framework developed here.
4.1 Introduction

So far, in the previous chapter, social imaginaries have been conceptualised as collective constructions imbued with aspirations that have symbolic power, providing interpretive resources for self-construction. As discursive structures, imaginaries come with framing power that influences subjects’ understanding of the social world and their place in it, and how people understand common practices (González-Vélez, 2002) and relations that hold between people (Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, being interlinked with material objects and technologies of classification (Anderson, 2006 [1983]; Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014), material practices are intrinsically linked to imaginaries (Brinkmann, 2010); imaginaries are thus not dependent on symbolic discourses alone, but various technologies are implicated in the construction of these (Appadurai, 1996). Furthermore, imaginaries are social practices that are driven by normative expectations (Appadurai, 1996; Taylor, 2002). Appadurai (1996) argues imagination has become a constitutive feature of contemporary subjectivity, propelled by, for example, media technologies and increased mobility that influence the flow of global meanings. In today’s media-saturated world, the processes of circulation (e.g. Sumiala & Tikka, 2011) participate in both the construction and modification of imaginaries as well as function to expand the scope by inviting new participants (e.g. Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014), being thus also connected to the construction of a sense of belonging.

With this thesis, I want to explore in more detail the semiotic dimension of social imaginaries in an attempt to understand how the self is positioned today by what is valued in our society in this point of time and constructed in the imaginary as preferred ways of being, doing and relating. Individuals are positioned differentially by evaluative configurations of relations against the canvas of culturally esteemed value systems. A semiotic approach helps us examine cultural values as social constructions that are typical of the times, and what these might be, but also the relationality of such systems. The empirical studies, presented in Chapter 6, offer a snapshot of possible articulations of the self on social media: examining plus-sized fashion bloggers and celebrity fans in their respective semiotic spaces offers a glimpse of some of the dominant discourses reflective of how we imagine our social existence.

To elaborate on the relational processes negotiated at the site of the self and the evaluation that flows therein, I will draw on the notions of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relational orders in semiotic systems to examine the relational constitution of being. Conceptualising social imaginaries as semiotic systems allows us to entertain the idea of imaginaries as systems of signification, as systems of difference, where cultural meanings are relational, fluid, and subject to alteration by way of social convention. Thus, my approach is social constructionist throughout. I do, however, draw on Saussure, 1983 [1916]) as well as the socially oriented theory of language, Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; see also Thompson, 2013; Eggins, 2004), SFL from now on (see Chapter
5.5.1. for an overview of the principles of SFL). The theoretical framework of SFL has its roots in Halliday’s ‘language as a social semiotic’ (Halliday, 1993[1975]). In terms of these two frameworks, with SFL being largely defined “in opposition to Saussure’s analytical priorities” (Chandler, 2007: 220), I am particularly interested in the concepts of choice (developed in SFL into system networks) and associative relations (Saussure’s term for paradigmatic relations), both relating to the semiotic potential of resources of meaning (see also Lemke, 2009).

Saussure has come under a lot of criticism from the poststructuralist school of thought that understand Saussure’s ideas as positing rigid binary oppositions that function in a closed system of signification without external (social) influence. However, original writings of Saussure previously unknown to the public were recovered in 1996 in Geneva, which have added new nuances to Saussure’s theory (the influential Cours de linguistique générale is a compilation of notes, edited by Saussure’s students). The new discovery (Saussure, 2002) reveals Saussure to be less categorical in his thinking (if not in practice) than previously interpreted to be, and although he employs binary distinctions in his theorising, they constitute meaningful oppositions and entail complementarity: it is the “the oppositional relations which give language its virtually infinite potential” (Saussure, 2006/2002: xxix, Sanders in Introduction). Importantly, Saussure also took into consideration the influence of the social on meaning in accounting for the complexity of language, for example, in terms of polysemy. Indeed, the writings discovered later on reveal that for Saussure the language system, or ‘langue’, is “conceived of as collective and social [] and rooted in history” (Saussure 2006/2002: xxiii, Sanders in Introduction).

Thus, discourse and language use were important in Saussure’s thinking as he emphasised communication and human interaction as the function of language, although he may not have engaged with these issues in his own writing.

Similarly, Chandler (2007) notes that Saussure’s binary concepts should not be understood in such a stark opposition as is usually the case; rather, it is a question of relationality and mutual constitution, and thus how things/concepts mean in relation to each other. Thus, the dualism that concepts may imply is not to state that these should be taken at face value, rather, they are conceptual aids. Concepts are not oppositional as much as they are complementary. That is, they require the presence of the other to be understood, and to mean. Using the concept of ‘difference’, and likewise the concept ‘system of differences’, comes with baggage; thus, I emphasise that I do this with a social constructionist bias, underlining how “our sign-systems (language and other media) play a major part in ‘the social construction of the reality’ (or at least ‘the construction of social reality’) and that realities cannot be separated from the sign-systems in which they are experienced” (Chandler, 2007: xv).

As the purpose here is not to develop a ‘semiotics of the imaginary’, but rather to approach the notion of imaginary from a relational perspective in order to illuminate the relational processes of inclusion and exclusion, I will limit the discussion of semiotics (Saussurean or otherwise) to the concepts and insights I find useful in developing my relational perspective to imaginaries. Thus, my framework is
not intended to be read as a direct application of Saussurean theory of signs. That having been said, I wish to further delineate the focus of my discussion for the sake of clarity: I am not interested in discussing (although relevant, particularly the culturally constructed ideational component of evaluative terms) the familiar triad of the sign, the signifier and the signified, and how these exist in arbitrary relation; rather, I focus on the comparative or complementary elements of a system that give rise to meaning by way of choice (in SFL, choice is represented in a ‘system network’ where paradigmatic relations are privileged, see Eggins, 2004: 194-205), but also by way of a dual contrast.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on how we might think of social imaginaries as semiotic systems, and how, due to the evaluative dimension of semiotic systems, imaginaries can also be seen as normative frameworks against which individuals are positioned. I will then discuss how this leads to relations of inclusion and exclusion (and discursive alignment and disalignment), and also touch on the notion of associative opposition, which can help us understand seemingly unrelated reactions and the polarised discourses online. This chapter concludes with a brief consideration of the role of object relations in the relational matrix.

4.2 Social imaginaries as semiotic systems

People and societies “exist through the imaginary”, writes Bouchet (1994: 407), defined as “the world of symbols which constitute the system of differences orienting everyday life”, positioning individuals and organising social activities. These systems of differences are real in the sense that these significations exist and they, and any alteration in them, have real consequences for people’s lives (Castoriadis, 1994; see also Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014), and therefore, critical attention should be paid to how imaginaries come ‘to mean’. For Barthes (1967 [1964]: 9), semiotics (or ‘semiology’) is concerned with a wide range of phenomena, semiotic theory aiming indeed “to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits”, or, to examine “anything that can stand for something else” (Griffin, 2012 [1991]: 332). While I explore the semiotic spaces constructed on social media and the articulations of self therein, these semiotic spaces span the whole of life, with the localised being enmeshed in the global (see e.g. Hall, 1996b). The advantage of conceptualising social imaginaries as semiotic systems is that it entails meanings ‘come to mean’ in relation to each other by way of social convention; thus, meanings are also open for contestation and re-articulation. Semiotic approach is not about recovering any ‘truths’ about or behind representation, but it can, however, help show whether a given (linguistic, visual, multimodal) representation is being represented as ‘true’; social semiotic perspective takes ‘truth’ to be “a construct of semiosis” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 159).

In a similar fashion, Castoriadis (1994: 321, emphasis in original) saw imagination as essential for the construction of social reality, that is, he writes, “it is because
radical imagination exists that ‘reality’ exists for us – exists tout court – and exists as it exists”. He (Ibid.) included significations in his account of imagination, which he considered the source of individual (as well as collective) social worlds and the reason why and how individuals posit themselves in the said world. Individuals’ ‘imagined worlds’ (however, ‘real’ in the sense that they impacts us) are unique, which, according to Castoriadis (Ibid.) enables what he calls ‘distanciation’ from the world that is “a given”; I agree on this notion of personalised imaginative constructions and will discuss the process of distanciation as a relation of disalignment regarding the imaginary.

To examine the relational construction of significations I will first turn to Saussure (1983[1916]); Saussure’s influential notion was to view language as a semiotic system, and this system comprises horizontal and vertical axes, corresponding to the syntagmatic (sequential relations) and paradigmatic (relations of oppositions) orders, illustrated in Figure 1. below. System, as a concept, implies interconnectedness of meaning: meanings are not isolated from the surroundings in which they exist. By existing in relation to other meanings, in representation (see e.g. Hall, 1997a) as much as in imaginary constructions, some meanings are prioritised (and/or naturalised) at the expense of others by way of choice. As Saussure was primarily (although not only) interested in the system of sounds, for him, the act of producing a sound (rather than some other sound) was already an act of prioritisation, and thus an act of assigning value relative to that which was not chosen in the context.

This relates to, as well as results in, paradigmatic choices (see Saussure, 1983[1916]: 121-125): in phonetics, for example, syntagmatic (i.e. sequential) relations are governed by what can and cannot follow or precede a given sound. In this thesis, in conjunction of the imaginary, I am concerned with social and cultural meanings, in representations and ‘common understandings’ as social and cultural constructions, not lexical items or the system of language per se.

Semiotic systems can be conceptualised as having two dimensions that construct the differences between signifiers: of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, Saussure (1983[1916]): 123) called the latter ‘associative’ relation. Associative relations and syntagmatic relations are both involved in the process of semiosis: this is because it is not only the semiotic potential that is realised (paradigmatic/associative relations), but the way it is put together that matters (syntagmatic relations), that is, from the same “word cloud” very different significations can be produced. These two dimensions lie at the heart of the conceptual differences we find in a system of relational meaning.

The two relational orders, syntagmatic and paradigmatic, are illustrated in Figure 1.
The sign for Saussure was a marriage of a signifier with a signified, and the linguistic sign, to him, was completely immaterial: this is because “words have no value in themselves — that is their value” (Chandler, 2007: 17). Meaning is thus possible only because of the relationality of concepts and signs in the socially shared system of differences. Later, scholars have argued for the materiality of signs, as representational systems involve practices that also make use of material objects (e.g. Hall, 1997a). However, meaning is socially constructed by convention, not attached per se to a particular object.

A dual contrast thus governs the realisation of meaning potential (see also Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, SFL approach on meaning). Conceptually, Saussure saw ‘langue’ to be a “a particular socially shared system of signs”, whereas ‘parole’ was “the individual’s realization of that system” (Joseph, 2012: 591): the syntagmatic and paradigmatic orders fall within ‘langue’, and apply on the level of the signifier, signified or any semiotic construct (Chandler, 2007). What limitations might exist on combinations of significations as these are constructed in the imaginary are socially and culturally constructed and constrained, as I will argue, contextually and relationally emergent as well as dependent. As social conventions and social action are crucial in producing meaning, social practices also have the power to alter existing meanings. The paradigmatic relations in the system (as a pool of significations) offer resources for both meaning making and self-interpretation and provide a range of associative meanings in the same order.

If we think about the imaginary, the choices are constructed in the imaginary, realised as representations and understandings of shared social reality, motivated and constrained by cultural aspirations as much as by norms: for example, how the
female body is evaluated and disciplined, or how grief is perceived and critiqued, depend on and arise from paradigmatic (i.e. associative) choices among evaluative resources (for example, whether the fat female body evaluated as acceptable or deviant). Consequently, we witness syntagmatic orders, that is, sequential orders (i.e. what can and cannot precede or follow a certain item), some of which are more culturally persistent (see Lemke, 2009) than others (for example, does the concept ‘woman’ appear in the same sequential cluster with ‘powerful’). These two relational orders governing the realisation of significations are thus interrelated. Table 2 below illustrates these two axes and how they operate to structure and organise meaning.

Table 2. Syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntagmatic relations of sequence</th>
<th>Paradigmatic relations of choice, ‘associative opposition’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>women are so repulsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big</td>
<td>men are quite attractive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slim</td>
<td>women are more beautiful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commemorating</td>
<td>family is absolutely normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commemorating</td>
<td>celebrity is so stupid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commemorating</td>
<td>strangers is very weird</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 above orients us to consider what Saussure calls ‘associative opposition’ (1983[1916]: 124), shown in Table 2 under paradigmatic order (see also Fig. 1.). As Saussure called paradigmatic relations associative relations, he also used the term ‘associative opposition’ to refer to alternative meanings in the same order, as well as to refer to the difference that holds between alternative meanings in that order (as these associative oppositions hold relationally ‘in absentia’, as they cannot all be realised at once, as opposed to the syntagmatic order where all the elements in a syntagm are realised as a sequence, as shown in Table 2). Thus, evaluative terms in the last column (purposefully chosen as provocative to make a point) stand in paradigmatic, or associative, relation to each other, and these relations thus hold ‘in absentia’: this is because any one of them could be used in any sentence and thereby brought into the discourse, yet, only one can be used at any one time in the sequence.

This point involves choice, and as observed by Lemke (2009: 287), although theoretically we could make a range of syntagms and thus a range of meanings and evaluations, our tendency to construe certain syntagms over others arises from our cultural experience, which “suggests a greater likelihood that certain kinds
of signs in certain modes of juxtaposition ought to be meaningful”. Our lives are saturated with meanings of various kinds where some “multimodal sytagms”, such as gendered advertising content, for example, are more typical, familiar and common (that is, conventionalised) than some other kind (Ibid.).

It thus follows that whichever lexical item in the paradigm is privileged by the act of choice, it comes to mean ‘in praesentia’ at the syntagmatic axis. Syntagmatic relations thus hold ‘in praesentia’ (see Saussure, 1983[1916]: 122), because syntagmatic relation is a matter of sequence and co-presence, whereas paradigmatic relations are a matter of choice (items not chosen remain associative). For this reason, Saussure called paradigmatic (comparative) choices as being in an ‘associative’ relation to each other: they hold ‘in absentia’, yet populating the semiotic space. See Figure 2 below for illustration of the two orders of relationship presented as axes (modified from Eggins, 2004, Fig 7.1.), and the imaginary presented as a semiotic system of relations of paradigmatic and syntagmatic nature.

![Diagram: Social imaginary as a semiotic system]

Figure 2. Social imaginary as a semiotic system

Associative opposition does not only explain paradigmatic choices in the semiotic space and the discursive mechanism of alienation and disenfranchisement, but can also be usefully applied to explain contrarian discourse online (illustrated by Article IV) where the outsiders (as contextually rendered as such) prioritise para-
digmatically different meanings from those that they are responding to by way of association: that is, from the discursive space on social media, for example, from the possible and potential meanings that hold ‘in absentia’, the outsider might choose meanings by way of associative opposition. While such discursive behaviour (e.g. hate speech online) usually seems to occur in contextually inappropriate places, and indeed out of place, we can now see that it does, in fact, occur in a semiotic space of associative relations, contextually engendered as inappropriate.

4.3 Social imaginaries as normative frameworks

Examining social imaginaries from the perspective of semiotics brings with it the normative dimension characteristic of such a system of significations. As Bauman (1990: 145, emphasis added) aptly writes, because of the “awesome and overwhelming authority which shapes human bodies and thought appears in the form of ‘public opinion’, fashion, ‘common consent’, ‘expert view’ or even such an elusive entity as common sense – which is a sense of all, but of nobody in particular”, the power of the norm is not only unimaginable, it is also unfathomable. Normativity is characteristic of culture, and how in a particular culture different things are valued varies. Normativity thus relates to discursive and moral evaluation and judgement, and is contextual, situational and culturally bound (see e.g. Leppänen, Møller, Nørreby, Stæhr & Kytöla). Imaginaries likewise have a normative dimension: they construct and orient how people imagine, and by providing interpretive resources for the self, imaginaries also evaluate what kinds of selves are possible. Relational existence is constituted by relations of alienation and rejection as much as by relations of affirmation, and not less so when we are suspended in imaginary relational flows.

As imaginaries cannot be all encompassing, they can be seen as inherently limited. Inspired by the linguistic concept of a ‘putative reader’ (see e.g. Geoff Thompson, 2013) and Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism wherefrom the notion of the ‘putative reader written into the text’ emerges, I argue social imaginaries not only comprise a set of social practices, but also contain (constructed) identification points particularly in the form of aspirations and potentialities, these being constructed in or ‘written into them’. As such, they are constraining as they offer certain possibilities for imagining but not others. As constructions, however, these are subject to change: the central role of social action in producing meaning is, in fact, encapsulated in the notion of arbitrariness: as the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, the very concept of arbitrariness shows why social activity is needed to create a semiotic system (Chandler, 2007), and how “community is necessary in order to establish values [which] have no other rationale than usage and general agreement” (Saussure, 1983 [1916]: 111-113).

Furthermore, value, although part of meaning, is not interchangeable with it (Chandler, 2007): rather, value or ‘valeur’ is definable in terms of a lack, what
something is not, i.e. the relational position it has in the system of significations. Value of any type, argues Saussure, requires that the thing whose value is being considered is at the same time both dissimilar and similar to some other thing: dissimilar (associative relations) so that the thing whose value is under consideration can be exchanged for it (money for bread, for example), and similar (syntagmatic relations) so that the thing whose value is under consideration can be compared to it. Values, as “entirely a matter of internal relations” (Saussure, 1983 [1916]; 111-113), are thus necessarily contextual and relational; for Saussure, values are also immaterial in the sense that they are “distinct from the tangible element which serves as their vehicle (Saussure, 1983 [1916]; 116), pointing to social convention as being at the root of signifying practice.

While material culture objectifies cultural values in physical objects and commodities, in cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1986b), values are also embedded more implicitly in symbolic representations and meanings. If we think in terms of associative relations in a semiotic space constructed online, we can see how different symbolic evaluations populate the space and the imaginaries, some actualised and others obscured. It is the relational position of the actualised as privileged to the obscured in the space of associative relations that constructs normative meaning.

Semiotic systems are thus systems of value, where values are embedded in, for example, material objects as well as in material practices, although this relationship is not fixed. We can extend this idea to include in the semiotic spaces constructed in digital environments the material digital objects (e.g. video productions, selfies, etc.) that serve as mediators (Article I and II) of various cultural values (see also Horst & Miller, 2012). Semiotic spaces on social media are constrained and motivated by social and contextual factors as to which significations are privileged and which imaginaries are mobilised. Social media tend to facilitate the relational negotiation of one’s social placement, for example relations of exclusion and marginalisation (Article I and III) because the contextualised relational configurations tend to be affirming. Even in the case of conflicting voices, the relational tension tends to strengthen alignment (Article IV).

Approaching social imaginaries as semiotic systems we can also better explore the semiotic potential of the imaginary (as imaginaries participate in the construction of both conceivable action and terrains of aspiration), and the ways of relating to these as well as negotiating these. As has been discussed throughout the thesis, within the relational framework identification occurs even when the relation is not affirmative, that is, when it is of negative nature, and thus identifications form an incoherent system, as discussed in 2.3. Furthermore, absence in the imaginary evokes identification via a lack, via exclusion from the popular imagination. Relations of alienation thus also figure in the processes of self-construction (and therefore to use the term ‘disidentification’ would be confusing, and I have chosen to talk instead about alignment and disalignment as modes of relating).

Therefore, to further explore the nature and workings of the relational processes constitutive of the self, I suggest further conceptualisation of the relational dynamics...
in terms of relations of inclusion and exclusion. Identification evoked by a particular imaginary that is alienating or conflicting nevertheless constitutes the subject, even if as lacking. The mode of relating, then, is of alignment, or of disalignment, illustrated in the Figure 3 below.

To illustrate, in Article I, plus-sized bloggers feel marginalised by the hegemonic discourses regarding the female body, and excluded from the terrain of aspirations that construct a self that is in control (over the body, for example) and forever striving for improvement (by dieting, for example). Fatshion blogging as social practice is nevertheless altering the fashion imagery and the imagery of female bodies, including in the range of representations alternative bodies (Pullen, 2011). Likewise, reappropriation of referring, evaluative terms is an example of altering meaning, for example, reappropriation of the term ‘fat’ by the bloggers, or indeed the coinage of the very term ‘fatshionista’ that the bloggers use to refer to themselves. The practice of fatshion blogging is altering which choices are being made among the paradigmatic, associative pool of meanings, and realised in the newly constructed imagination. Value is relationally constructed in the blogging context, whereas outside of it such value may disappear (marginalisation). Likewise, fans are expanding the scope of normative mourning by engaging in practices such as public commemoration.

Normativity shows up in allusions to a breach of a norm voiced from the outside: for the bloggers, it is size, for the fans it is illegitimate grief. Norms usually become apparent when in interaction someone denies, rejects, forbids or scolds the other (Alasuutari, 1999: 224), but also when someone in their own recount of their action describes adhering to or abiding by some ‘moral code’ or ethic. However,
acknowledgement of a norm is also an acknowledgement for opportunities of differential, alternative action (Alasuutari, 1999: 225). The normative dimension of imaginaries can be viewed in terms of the semiotic choices and symbolic meanings that are prioritised, and thereby normalised; the alternative choices remain in the background as associative relations that exist as potential interpretive resources and, likewise, as semiotic potential.

In this way we can see how seemingly unrelated things can, in fact, be related because they inhabit the same semiotic space. An example of this is ‘thin’ bodies and ‘fat’ bodies: the presence of dissimilar bodies, bodies that do not adhere to the normative specification are readily considered both inferior and threatening; inferior, because of the lack of normative beauty, and threatening because of the possible “downward mobility” of the normatively suitable bodies (LeBesco, 2004: 54). What the fat female body represents (by meaning given ‘in praesentia’) is valorised, while the meanings residing ‘in absentia’ in the dominant social imaginary governing the female body are, in fact, visually, bodily, and materially manifested.

Figure 4. below illustrates the relational forces intersecting at the site of the self; it shows how identification takes place with meanings that are explicit (and hold in praesentia), but also with those that are implicit (that hold in absentia) and absent from representations, yet available as associative meanings within the semiotic space in question.

![Diagram of Social Imaginary as a Semiotic System](image)

**Figure 4. Negotiation of conflicting relations on social media**

Imagination affords interpretative resources in a potentially open-ended manner, and in terms of semiotic alternatives forming a semiotic space where meanings
hold in absentia, there can be “as many associative series as there are different relations” (Saussure, 1983[1916]: 124, emphasis added). I argue that these associative possibilities of semiotic systems position the self by constructing individuals as included or excluded subjects in the imaginary; yet, the creative potential also offers room for contestation and negotiation, and the creation of new multimodal syntagms to enrich the repertoire of existing subject positions, like the plus-sized fashion bloggers are doing.

Imaginaries host and mediate “collectively constructed aspirations”: being collective does not mean they are shared or accepted by everyone, but rather, it refers to those meanings that are privileged by being included in common cultural representations, and thereby normalised. Thus, although people might be aware of what the commonly shared aspirations are, these may be rejected or found alienating.

One example is the enterprising self, the self under constant improvement that dominates the popular discourses of the self. This self looks after her wellbeing, her body, her relationships, as well as eats well, sleeps enough, engages in relaxing activities, refuses to work too much while at the same time achieving a lot, practices downshifting while breaking glass ceilings. Such aspiration regarding self-improvement and self-work is often masked in discourses promoting individualism, masquerading as ‘care for the self’ and advocating ‘being oneself’ in the face of today’s increasing demands. There is a paradox: in order to ‘be oneself’, one has to first make the self. Such making the self in order to ‘be oneself’ is indicative of today’s society where the self as is often is not good enough and where it is not the case that all kinds of selves are acceptable in the matrix of acceptable personhood.

4.4 Object relations in web of significations

Although Gergen’s relational approach to being mainly concerns human relationships, he (1999a: 138) also expresses the call to move beyond the social to extend “the concept of relation to include the world of non-social”; by this he means largely the physical environment. Thus, his is an attempt to include the social while trying to avoid creating binaries such as social/non-social, or culture/nature, whereby one would inevitably be privileged at the expense of the other. The concept of the relational self already presumes these relations are social; yet, we should not isolate our social existence from the natural environment we are immersed in (Gergen, 2011b).

Within the relational framework, we are to understand “ourselves as constituents of a process that eclipses any individual within it, but is simultaneously constituted by its individual elements” (Gergen, 1999a: 129): today, these elements come in a variety of forms and modes, the digital being an added (socio-technical) element in the process.

Material objects are part of the semiotic space constructed in digital environments, and mediate relationally infused meanings (see e.g. Bettany, 2007). Likewise, the social imaginary operates in a complex configuration of social, cultural, as well as material relations; imaginaries are not merely individual, psychological possessions,
but “attached to material objects and representations” that have the capacity to “invite new actors to become affected by them” (Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014: 240). Therefore, in developing an account of the relational self in the digital context, in addition to viewing social imaginaries as semiotic systems with value-assigning and norm-endorsing capacity, we need to consider the material culture of digital spaces (e.g. Lehdonvirta, 2010; Sundén, 2003) in terms of forming and shaping relations as well as providing access to and upholding imaginaries. This means both material in the traditional sense (tangible physical objects), but also material as in the materiality of the digital. In relational configurations material objects (e.g. media texts) are infused with meanings, acting as digital subjects in the relational matrix. Thus, digital artefacts mediate access not only to the present, but also to the past and the potential that are constructed in the form of social imaginaries (see Valaskivi & Sumiala, 2014).

In material culture, “cultural life is objectified, [] objects are constructed as social forms, and hence in which cultural artefacts have to be understood in relationship to their social and spatial contexts” (Cook & Crang, 1996: 132). Consumer culture is a specific type of material culture that envelops not only spaces of the everyday in the offline context, but permeates most digital spaces, too (e.g. Lehdonvirta, 2010). We should thus bear in mind that digital culture is, at the same time, material culture, and the digital realm hosts an array of digital artefacts (e.g. memorial tributes, videos, selfies, and so on) that carry a range of significations, constituting a part of consumer culture as well as mediating it. The digital realm also constitutes a social and spatial context where cultural artefacts emerge, some only in digital form. As material objects gain meaning either by way of utility or by personal signification, such objectification of meaning enables cultural positioning (Appadurai, 1996; Miller, 2012) as well as evaluation.

 Commodities not only serve to objectify values (Miller 2012), such as family, friendship, individualism, collectivity, materialism, spirituality, but material objects and artefacts, including digital artefacts, have come to embody meanings and values in a very tangible way (Sassatelli, 2014). Digital artefacts and media texts are objects that enter into relationships as subjects with relational capacity that also figure in the processes of self-construction. Moreover, because of the embedding of the online in the offline, we need to consider the nature of this interconnectedness and the role of material objects in digital relations more carefully from new perspectives, for example, normativity (see e.g. Horst & Miller, 2012).

This study is just an indication of how crucial in relational self-construction the various artefacts are (see Bettany, 2007), particularly in digital contexts where the artefacts also contribute as contextual factors and thus participate in the construction of social spaces by way of signposting these as particular kinds of spaces. The way material relations contribute to an emerging self not only by providing access to and mediating meanings, but also in the production of meanings, is illustrated in Articles I and II, showing how consumption practices mediate relations with the material.
4.5 Summary: the relational self in the digital environment

The conceptual framework developed here helps approach the question of how the self is positioned at the intersection of new media and contemporary consumer culture, first, by conceptualising social imaginaries as semiotic systems that, as all systems of signification, have the capacity to assign value and, second, by showing how, due to the value-assigning dimension, imaginaries function as normative frameworks that enter into constitutive relations of inclusion and exclusion. This leads to differential positioning of individuals, even to othering as manifested in processes of marginalisation. Relations of inclusion and exclusion operate as individuals are positioned with differential inclusion as subjects in popular imaginaries. Thus, while some are ‘included subjects’, others present as ‘excluded subjects’.

Imaginaries, however, are open to multiple readings, and no doubt offer a range of interpretative resources for the imagining of the self; however, instead of offering endless creative potential for self-imagining, I argue that imaginaries are also constraining and constrained (not open-ended; however, see Firat & Dholakia, 2016, for the construer subjectivity). As imaginaries are not static, stable systems, however, they are open for contestation, negotiation, and rearticulation at the site of the self, and the semiotic spaces afforded by social media for the emergence of relational congruence, for example, offer contextually and situationally meaningful and affirming relational configurations where existing imaginaries can be negotiated, and new ones created.

A relational perspective to imaginaries as systems of signification allows us to examine how the self ‘becomes’ and alters in and through social practices, social relations and contemporary discourses of the self. The relational self articulated in digital contexts is constructed under the conditions of the digital environment, the technical possibilities (affordances and constraints), the discursive and semiotic resources, all the while the digital being embedded in the socio-cultural and economic context of the consumer society. Social space(s) constructed in and by social media are often treated as transnational, transcultural, and translocal, and communities therein often escaping traditional classification systems based on, for example, age, gender or nationality. Electronic media has also been seen as mediating time and space (see Tsatsou, 2009), rendering ‘space’ a significant and essential element in the interconnectedness of the Internet and our social world.

As has been argued so far, what often invites individuals to shared sociality is the pull of the social imaginary and the emotional states thus evoked. Alignments are thus regularly formed around emotional resonance, ideological alignment, shared social motives and goals, and so on. For this reason, when referring to the “other”, I have chosen to use the term ‘congruence’, meaning harmony, compatibility and agreement. It allows me to talk about “like-minded people” in an imagined community (and inevitably also a community constructed by the researcher) as forming a collective of congruent others; by this I mean that in the social context constructed by the digital setting these individuals are rendered congruent. Similarly,
individuals can be contextually rendered as ‘incongruent’ (see Article IV). These terms are then contextual terms and refer to situated sense of similarity, or ‘digital togetherness’ (Marino, 2015).
5 Research design

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design of the dissertation. The study is a multi-disciplinary enquiry and draws on such disciplines as media and communication studies, linguistics, cultural studies, Internet studies, gender studies, and consumer culture theory. The aim of such an approach is to gain a more holistic picture of a complex object of study. The goal, thus, is to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem, to offer one perspective on how to examine self-construction online. The study also employs a multi-method approach to analysis, combining different discourse analytical approaches while adhering to the qualitative research paradigm. All the material is collected online, and can thus be said to typify computer-mediated discourse (e.g. Herring, 2001).

In adopting the relational approach to investigating the many articulations of the self at the intersection of consumption and new media, it is clear that we cannot conceptualise the self as located online; the self is not anchored in media texts, in digital artefacts, user-generated imagery, or other productions documented and shared online that pertain to the individual, their life and their person. Rather, these digital ‘extensions’ and objects populate the web of relations already occupied by the individual, entering into numerous relations with the capacity to shape the self. Examining the construction of self in the digital context is not straightforward; as Markham (2004a: 115) points out, “people interacting in computer-mediated contexts negotiate, rather than simply observe or discover, the identities and social realities of the others with whom they are interacting”.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the philosophical positioning of the study and qualitative research in the digital context. I will then present the empirical material used in the independent research articles and discuss the methods used in their analysis. The chapter concludes with a summary of material and methods.

5.2 Philosophical positioning

The philosophical paradigm informing this qualitative study is that of social constructionism. Social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, (1987 [1966]); Gergen, 1994, 1999a, 2015) is based on the idea that the material world as well as
social reality are social constructions; what this means is that although the world exists independent of the human mind, knowing and knowledge of it is a human construction, and our social reality is constituted through subjective meanings. Such a view on epistemology (how we know and make sense of the world) rests on the assumption that all knowledge is a construction.

Regarding ontology, Gergen (2001b: 318-319), as a renowned social constructivist, reminds us that “the constructionist orientation from which [his] work emanates neither denies nor asserts anything as true or real”, and is, thus, “ontologically mute” – it is the interpretations, possible and optional, of what there is or is not that matter, and which are the product of social construction. Thus, in the constructivist paradigm, not only knowledge, but any research endeavour, is a socially constructed achievement (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999a; see also Lindlof & Grubb-Swetnam, 1996b). Likewise, the current study is but one interpretation of the social reality observed and offers but one perspective on it. As Alasuutari (1996) aptly notes, the aim of a qualitative inquiry (particularly in social and cultural studies) is to provide an account of the local, that is, a historically situated account of some social reality instead of attempting to generalise the global. To assume that a local would be, or could be, representative of all social realities would be going against the very foundational idea behind constructionism that sees social reality as constructed: it is thus wise to bear in mind that social realities are not the same for everyone.

What follows is that the researcher, when carrying out qualitative research embedded in the constructionist paradigm, inevitably constructs the interpretations that are arrived at through the analysis, her own socio-historical positioning affecting the research outcome as it guides not only the researcher’s interpretations (Alasuutari, 1999, 2001) but also the research questions. Social constructionism can also be seen as a dialogue as “constructionism invites collaboration among people in giving sense and significance to the world” (Gergen, 1999a: 228), and thereby alternative constructions are invited into a dialogue in hopes of new insight. Indeed, approaching empirical material from different theoretical perspectives “is basically a means of reflection and self-reflection aiming at new insights about the cultural premises of social life” (Alasuutari, 1996: 382).

In ethnographic research, as in Articles II-IV in this dissertation, it is common to examine individuals as representatives of their culture, usually with the premise that a common factor exists that brings a community together. However, it is important to remember that by investigating the community, the researcher at the same time participates in constructing the shared reality, and thus also the object of study. Notably, the researcher is, in any case, historically situated and bound, which is evident in how the research questions are drawn up, as well as in the ways in which the world is conceptualised by the researcher (Alasuutari, 2001: 75). Approaching theories as “deconstructions of the way in which we construct realities and social conditions and ourselves as subjects in those realities”, Alasuutari (1996: 382) points out that it is not the function of social theories, generated by qualitative empirical
enquiry, for example, to “tell us what society is really like”, but, rather, to offer new perspectives and alternative understandings of how to examine and think about our social lives. The selection of method, then, requires reflexivity regarding the ways in which the chosen method (including theory) shapes the results as well as the image of the world that it yields (Couldry, 2000).

The role of language in constituting reality and social life has special emphasis in constructivist thinking, where meanings are seen as being negotiated and renegotiated in discourse. As a method for qualitative, interpretive research, discourse analysis is in line with social constructivist approach where discourses are seen as constituting social reality, relationships, ideologies and power relations. Discourse analysis will be discussed in more detail in 5.5.1. below, but before that, I will first discuss doing qualitative research in digital contexts, as well as present the empirical material used in the study.

5.3 Qualitative research in digital context

Qualitative research “focuses on human action” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 19) and thus the objective of qualitative inquiry is enhancing our understanding of social and cultural phenomena as well as the human experience (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007). In qualitative research tradition, material and method go hand in hand just as theory and research questions do: while the type of material guides the method of choice to a degree, the method also needs to be such as to be able to provide an answer to the set research questions (Silverman, 2005; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008; Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara, 2005 [1997]). When examining empirical material, the theoretical framework together with research questions guide which aspects recoverable in the material fall within the scope of investigation as relevant (Alasuutari, 1999).

It is, however, often the case that the same empirical material lends itself to scrutiny given different theoretical and analytical perspectives, and thus also different research questions. In this dissertation, Articles II-IV examine the same pool of empirical material, but from very different perspectives. The overall guiding interest is, however, in how the self is constructed, re-constructed, and co-constructed in the context of fandom at a specific time of relational rupture, and what and how various artefacts, social practices and relations (for example, with the fan object) mean. These questions were approached from different perspectives in the respective articles. The study on plus-sized fashion bloggers, presented in Article I, similarly focuses on how the self is a relational negotiation in a matrix of conflicting relational forces, and adopts a gender perspective to examine the phenomena of plus-sized fashion blogging.

As a site and object of study, the Internet is a fruitful source of empirical observation but also of theoretical insight. The Internet, and digital media more generally, both reflect and shape everyday life (e.g. van Dijck, 2013) and are more and more
embedded in everyday practices and relations (Bakardjieva, 2011). Thus, to study the Internet means at the same time to study the social in a contemporary context (Markham, 2017), not only to study the medium. Moreover, the interdisciplinary character of Internet studies allows for diverse scholarship (Ess & Dutton, 2013) and has been described as ‘a melting pot’ of researchers (Peng, Zhang, Zhong, & Zhu, 2013).

As an object of qualitative inquiry, the way the Internet is conceptualised has implications for research design and research questions. Markham (2004b) differentiates three ways of approaching the Internet: as a medium of communication; as a network of computers; and as a context for social construction. Consequently, the researcher may treat the Internet as a “tool for communicating”, or as a “place for communicating”, or indeed as a “way of being in the world” (Markham, 2004a: 98-99, 2017). While the first two are more self-explanatory, the third conceptualisation (rather than regarding the Internet as a medium for networked connectivity or a cultural space or virtual world) allows us to explore how individuals construct themselves and others in, as well as because of, online spaces and interaction therein. In other words, the Internet is seen as offering “a means for reinscribing, reconfiguring, or otherwise redefining identity, body, and self’s connection with other” (Markham, 2004a: 99).

Markham (2017: 10, emphasis in original) points out that although a useful heuristic, the “framework of tool, place and way of being” is not intended as a typology, but rather as a guide when investigating “the relationship among humans and their technologies in the digital era” as well as for establishing the boundaries of the research project: not being preexistent, boundaries “are constructed, through one’s philosophical, logistic, or experiential orientation toward the phenomenon, by the way the phenomenon seems to presents itself to the researcher, or how a researcher’s questions highlight certain elements” (Markham, 2017: 7), and for this the heuristic may prove useful.

Similarly, Internet-based research has been defined as research that “utilizes the Internet to collect information through an online tool, such as an online survey”, or one that studies “how people use the Internet, e.g. through collecting data and/or examining activities in or on any online environments”, but also as research that uses online databases (Buchanan, 2011: 90). With increased integration of the online with the offline practices and the convergence of media use in the everyday life, methods used to research the online realm from the social perspective do not significantly differ from those used in researching the offline realm (see e.g. Jensen, 2011; Buchanan, 2011), even if these need to be adapted to the context; Markham (2017), for example, has called for innovation regarding the use of ethnographic methods in digital contexts in order to adapt traditional methods to better capture social phenomena in the changing digital context.

Doing qualitative research online has some distinctive possibilities, if also its own limitations. One of the advantages is that the researcher is able to “study [the] social construction in progress as a real, enacted process rather than a theoretical
premise” (Markham, 2004a: 114) – that is, if we are positioned in the social constructivist paradigm and accept the basic premise of reality as socially constructed through language. In addition, Markham (2004a: 113) points out, the Internet allows us “to view these processes of social construction as solely discursive, textual interactions”, which however is not to rule out the materiality or embodiment in the digital context; digital objects and artefacts are also “dependent upon material instantiation” (Manoff, 2006: 312), consider, for example, interfaces, platforms, and coding: in addition to hardware, the materiality of digital objects and online communications emerges from material forces of production and consumption (Cool, 2012). Similarly, regarding embodiment, individuals interacting online may be embodied in the form of avatars or other representations of self in virtual spaces (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012) rather than being solely thought of as ‘physically embodied’ actors behind online performances (Banks, 2015).

Furthermore, and not the least, both the production of and access to digital artefacts and objects of self-representations are dependent on the technologies, intertwined with these (e.g. Couldry, 2012; Gergen, 1996). Already twenty years ago, Gergen (1996: 131) wanted to draw our attention to the role of the “technologies of human relatedness, those technologies that expose us to an even broadening array of others, that expand exponentially our potentials for significant relationship, that brings others closer more often, and in greater numbers than ever before”. This socially saturated world (Gergen, 1991) is a world where, as we engage more and more with others, with an increasing amount of distant others, the relational scope of our mode of being is ever expanding, where discursive homogeneity that serves to uphold and sustain belief systems in a given community is increasingly undermined by the multitude of technologies (Gergen, 1996: 132) by way of adding more voices to the mix.

The relational self emerges at the intersection of relations multiplied by various technologies. However, we can also argue that it is these very technologies today (like social media) that, likewise, allow for an increasing emergence of discursive homogeneity as individuals seek the company of their peers with similar outlook and ideological positioning. Both of these phenomena are illustrated in the research articles: in Article I, the plus-sized fashion bloggers construct a space of discursive homogeneity to fight marginalisation and stigma, and the fan – non-fan interaction examined in Articles II-IV shows both the discursive homogeneity of the fan collective while also exposing the increasing presence of alternative voices disrupting the space, both facilitated by new media technologies, with Article IV exploring the linguistic strategies of alignment and disalignment.

The specific nature of the materiality of digital objects allows for circulation, manipulation, re-construction and re-distribution (on convergence, see Baym, 2010; boyd, 2011), but it also places constraints, as Manoff (2006: 313) points out, as “any content, whether print or digital, is subject to the physical limitations of the technology used to produce and distribute it”. Texts, in the wider sense and meaning, are crucial in constructing and negotiating meaning. Multimodal content, visual content in particular, have an increased role in the digital material collected
from the Internet; this ‘turn’ (visual, pictorial, multimodal) also having its roots in the material changes and developments ranging from increased bandwidth to data compression algorithms (Manoff, 2006).

Moreover, as the meanings of digital objects cannot be divorced from their material realisations (the Internet as a context and technology, or YouTube video as a material instantiation of a social phenomenon) any more than those of physical objects (e.g. a book), qualitative research in digital environments needs to account for this complex, embedded, and interrelated mechanism of signification where choice of medium(s) influence and impact on content that in turn is influenced by wider social and cultural systems. Meanings embedded in digital objects are not merely recorded in and by them, acting as reflections of ‘reality’, but they actively construct whatever it is that they come to represent.

While ethnography and the associated fieldwork are applicable in the digital context (Hine, 2008; Postill & Pink, 2012; Markham, 2017), ethnographic inquiry, while popular, is by no means the only viable method for conducting research online (e.g. Markham, 2004a, 2004b; 2017). Digital ethnography has, however, gained in popularity over the years, and partly this popularity of method is due to the nature of online sociality as networked, communal and participatory, and partly due to the ease of application (e.g. Hine, 2008). As digital existence and online participation have, to a great degree, been approached from the perspective of community, ethnographic methods seem more than fitting for investigations of community participation as well as for participant-observation. Collecting material online by way of ethnographic means is also relatively straightforward (bearing in mind the ethical and moral considerations specific to the online environment, for example, anonymity and general safety of those being researched) and immersing in the online community under examination can be a fruitful way of data collection in terms of acquiring information that goes beyond the merely textual (see e.g. Kozinets, 2010).

In their handbook, *Ethnography and virtual worlds, a handbook of method*, Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor (2012) make a point of reminding us that it is not the extraordinary, but rather the ordinary, that is of interest to ethnographers doing research in online environments. Furthermore, Boellstorff et al. (2012: 47) note how “ethnographers regularly situate their studies of specific communities in broader social, cultural, and historical patterns”. To foreground ethnography as both a method as well as an attitude, Boellstorff et al. (2012: 4) underline the benefits of ethnographic research on social media, or computer-mediated communication more generally, while stressing that “ethnographers must be flexible in their techniques to make their methods sensitive to the contexts [they] study”. As ethnography aims to gain a better understanding of culture and the related processes and practices, it is well suited as a method for studying social media and sociality therein (see also Postill & Pink, 2012). Furthermore, how social media are “constituted as a research site are contingent on the methodologies and practical methods engaged” (Postill & Pink, 2012: 124), and in this thesis, social media are seen as discursive as well as socio-cultural constructions.
Another popular method of analysing digital material is discourse analysis, which is a suitable method of analysis for both textual and visual material; nowadays, digital material is, for the most part, multimodal. Discourse analysis has the capacity to account for such diverse material, and was in this thesis used in all four research articles. Discourse analysis will be covered in more detail in 5.5.1. First, however, I will present the empirical materials collected from the social media site YouTube and from plus-sized fashion blogs, and discuss a form of digital ethnography, netnography (Kozinets, 2010), used as a means for ethnographic data collection. The secondary sources that informed the analysis, Instagram and Twitter, are also briefly presented.

5.4 Empirical material

The material analysed in the four independent studies all represent forms of relating in online, digital spaces where consumption provides an intersecting relational point, while spanning as well as weaving together offline and online practices. All the empirical material was collected from social media sites, and in this section I will give a more detailed description of the material used in each study, but first, I will discuss digital ethnography.

5.4.1 Digital ethnography: netnographic collection of material

While digital ethnography differs somewhat from traditional ethnographic method, it is still based on it and forms a continuation of this research tradition. However, there are various ethnographic approaches to digital media (see e.g. Coleman, 2010; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Markham, 2017; Hine, 2008; Postill & Pink, 2012; Kozinets, 2010). As noted by Hine (2008: 2), “[v]irtual ethnography transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the Internet”. The ethnographic approach itself does not change just because we are studying digital environments: we are still engaged with studying the social, but looking at how the digital might be shaping and changing our social lives (Markham, 2006), and thus it is more about having an ethnographic outlook than of a rigid method (Ibid.).

I adopt Markham’s (2017) approach that digital ethnography is more an ethnographic outlook than an analytical method: netnography (Kozinets, 2010) was used for observing the interaction and social practices of collectives online as well as for the collection of material that was then further analysed using discourse-analytical methods. If we adopt the position that digital ethnography is an overall attitude, an outlook, then the ethnographic toolkit, despite the challenges brought on by the digital environment, remains largely the same. Yet, Sandvig & Hargittai (2015: 22) argue that research on digital media does in fact tend to modify traditional re-
search methods; they insist on how researchers turning to the Internet “looking for answers to the same old questions about identity, community, inequality, politics, organizations, culture, or other areas that they know from nondigital research, and they try to answer them using the traditional nondigital social research methods [ ], this experience can leave both their methods and their concepts quite changed”.

One example of a concept that has been redefined in the context of digital media research is that of ‘field’. While digital ethnography problematizes the notion of ‘field site’ or ‘place’, these need not be abandoned even if the practical method of carrying out fieldwork in digital context needs to be revised as transferring method from one context (e.g. offline) to another context (e.g. online) usually proves problematic (Markham, 2013a). Indeed, how can observation of blogs or YouTube be defined, or how the boundaries of a field be drawn when dealing with networked virtual sociality, and “to what extent are the boundaries discursive and relational” (Markham, 2013a). As an alternative, Markham (2013a: 438) suggests we think about field not as an object or place, but in terms of “movement, flow, and process”. Ethnographically-oriented observation can thus also be thought of in terms of sustained engagement. Participation, in the social media context, is equally a form of engagement, it is “understanding and engaging in the community of practice” (Markham, 2013a: 440) in question (for example, blogging and video sharing) where lurking can be categorised as a form of non-active participation.

A similar proposition comes from Postill and Pink (2012) who propose we approach social media ethnography from the perspective of routine, movement, and sociality that better caters to contemporary forms of sociality, but also the relatedness of online with the offline, as well as the researcher’s routine practices of carrying out digital ethnography. Ethnographic places, argue Postill and Pink (2012), are indeed the products of social media ethnographies; not only are they open, collaborative and public, they also traverse the online and offline context. Indeed, several digital ethnographies have demonstrated the embeddedness of digital technologies in everyday life, at the same time illustrating the mutuality and interdependence of the (online and offline) modes of being (e.g. Cool, 2012; Campbell, 2013; Tiidenberg, 2014). In fact, Hine (2008: 2) raises an important question of how long is the ‘marked category’ of virtual/digital/online ethnography warranted, as virtual ethnography already explores the “complex intersections and offline and online social spaces”; the challenge in the future, then, is “to develop forms of ethnography that take seriously the social reality of online settings, whilst also exploring their embedding within everyday life”.

Although regularly used in anthropological research, “the notions of field and fieldwork are of course always metaphors”, and the “field defined by a researcher is always a construction” (Alasuutari & Alasuutari, 2009: 326; see also Hine, 2008). Virtual community may also constitute a field, or field may be a theoretical construct created by the researcher: fans, for example, can be viewed as interpretative communities (Alasuutari, 2001: 83). Moreover, digital fieldwork, like any ethnography, may cover and include more information about a particular object of study than is
encapsulated in the analysed material (for example, sample text), informing the interpretation and enhancing the overall understanding of the social phenomenon.

It is also not uncommon for researchers familiar with the research context to draw on their own extensive knowledge regarding the society and culture in question as well as lifelong personal experiences as members of that culture (Alasuutari & Alasuutari, 2009). This was the case for the research reported in Articles II-IV: I, as an Apple user, am not completely unfamiliar with the culture, however, I nevertheless constitute an outsider when it comes to the fan community and fan ethos. Also, the ethnographic observation did yield more material in terms of observed (fan) cultural practices and meanings than were analysed in the end. The same applies to Article I, and the plus-sized fashion blogging scene, where consulting secondary material (covered in 5.4.4.) enhanced the understanding of the varied functions of fatshion blogging.

Furthermore, Sandvig & Hargittai (2015) urge digital media researchers to reflect more on the actual process of conducting research and not only the end result (usually in the form of academic article), as this will shed light on how the end result was achieved and allow replication if need be. Recounting the steps will also show the research process in a different light than might be assumed from clear-cut and neatly separate sections of “methods” and “results” (Sandvig & Hargittai, 2015: 2), elucidating the sometimes meandering path the research might have taken to become what now is the end result. A more detailed account of the process may also help assess the validity of the results (see also Alasuutari, 2001) as well as provide guidance to other researchers wishing to engage in research using similar method, important particularly in new and emerging fields such as digital media research.

To this end, Sandvig & Hargittai (2015: 4) call for a proper discussion of the process in the context of qualitative research generally, and in digital media research particularly, a discussion of the academic labour that goes into the research; to emphasise the nature of research as process they playfully call reflecting on method ‘a creative act’ that includes in its account the struggles and dramas encountered during the research process (see also Postill & Pink, 2012) which are often excluded in discussions of method. In this thesis, regarding research on the fan collective, one of the initial struggles was to make sense of the intense fan practices during the ethnographic phase (for example, very personal and intense attachment to technological objects, such as iPod or iPhone) as an outsider. As a solution, I consulted numerous different theories and inspected the cultural phenomena from multiple perspectives (Articles II-IV) in order to understand the fan practices, the meanings imbued in and mediated by these.

Collision of different subjective constructions of what and how things mean, as in this case of fandom, can be considered useful and valuable for research as this exposes differences in worldviews and how things are interpreted and experienced (Alasuutari, 2001), including that of the researcher. The digital ethnography on the fans aims to make visible differing worldviews. The emergence of differences that, at first, present to the researcher as incomprehensible may, at best, guide
the researcher to ask different kind of questions, but also to question her own pre-
conceptions (Alasuutari, 2001). The fandom around Steve Jobs, on the face of it, seemed strange to a person not a fan (of anything) herself, and thus cannot readily identify with fan subjectivity; however, this also exposes values and ideologies that are taken for granted, and perhaps leads to the questioning of these. With the help of theory it was possible to examine the social practices and understandings of the fans from multiple perspective, and each of the research articles (II-IV) approaches the fandom from a different point of view, offering different readings.

Following the ethnographic tradition, participant-observation and deep involvement in community still persist in digital ethnography (see Markham, 2017, for an overview). While participating can be a highly involved activity, the method ranges to merely observing. Ethnography allows the researcher to garner multiple observations, as the method facilitates observing and noticing the various (and differing) roles and strategies of individuals; the aim, however, is to interpret what it is that these individuals have in common, and thus, ethnographic research aims to understand the internal logic that organises the everyday life and thinking of the collective (Alasuutari 2001: 67). The community model, however, while applicable in online contexts, does not do justice to the complexity and diversity of social interaction online, something virtual ethnography has had to rethink (Hine, 2008; Postill, 2008).

Traditionally, the focus of interest of ethnographic research has been on factors pointing to or telling of the difference or marginalised position of the group being investigated (Alasuutari 2001). Indeed, Hine (2008: 8) aptly describes how “[e]thnography entails making strange things familiar by deploying sociological or anthropological concepts to interpret what might otherwise seem radically different cultural practice [while] it also focuses on making the familiar seem strange by questioning the taken-for-granted of daily practices and aiming to expose the cultural assumptions through which they come to make sense.” The researcher observes the community or a collective from a slightly different perspective than the members do, and doing so does not judge whether something is correct or incorrect, but focuses on exploring how the members’ perspective functions to constitute social realities (Alasuutari, 1996).

Netnography (Kozinets, 2010) is one of the digital ethnographic approaches. In his book, Netnography, Kozinets (2010: 60) defines netnography as “participant-observational research based on online fieldwork [that] uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon”. As in any ethnographic line of inquiry, at the heart of netnography lies the method of participant-observation. While netnography can be used in a manner of total immersion in an online community, including full participation in the community activities and practices, it is also possible to employ netnographic enquiry while remaining an observer only. In the empirical studies in this dissertation, the researcher remained an observer (non-active participation), not actively participating in the online community by
posting comments or engaging in exchanges with other members of the community.

When used as a tool for analysis, the method of ‘close reading’ resembles content analysis. While netnography entails a method of analysis, in this dissertation it was employed, first, for observation of community in order to gain a better understanding of both the online and offline community practices and the ideological positioning of what can be termed as ‘community members’ or the ‘fan community’, and second, for the selection of empirical material for further analysis by discourse analytical means among the wide selection of material available online on various social media platforms. Ethnographic research online can well be combined with discourse analysis (see Page, Barton, Unger, & Zappavigna, 2014: 124 on dialogue between (n)ethnography and discourse analysis), as was done in this study.

Selecting material for analysis after a netnographic observation is a more focused activity than collection of material without the knowledge gathered during such observation. Due to a longer time spent observing, for example, the Steve Jobs fan base in various social media sites, netnography allows both a contextualised as well as a more comprehensive view of the cultural practices of fandom than an analysis of text only (in the form of user commentaries) would. This is because such an approach provides insights gained by observing multiple sites over a long period of time, and as noted by Alasuutari (2001), ethnographic research often includes observing and making notes of far more things than fall under the research question. Care should however be taken so as not to mix interpretations and theories with observations and accounts thereof during the ethnography (Alasuutari, 2001: 69).

Online/digital ethnography thus allows choosing material that is representative, that is, material that contains important elements observed and that adhere to the generic criteria of community (for example, fan community formed around a digital memorial artefact), for example, sharing a sense of belonging stemming from shared interest. In this study (Articles II-IV), I spent almost three years between 2012-2014 observing the fans of Steve Jobs and fans of Apple (these categories may overlap, but are not the same thing) on various online sites and gained an understanding of the fandom(s), the fan practices, and the meanings constructed and shared in various communities by reading their discussion and commentaries, narratives of life experiences, and also the commemorative practices in digital spaces (but also offline memorial practice recounted in online settings). Netnography has not been widely applied in the context of YouTube (however, see Sumiala & Tikka, 2013).

Alasuutari (2001) notes that the ethnographer should spend as much time among the community as possible in order to no longer affect the community by her participation, thereby improving research validity. In the context of digital ethnography, participating online does not always include participation in a way that would disrupt the object of study: digital ethnography (see e.g. Boellstorff et al., 2012) may consist of observation of community practices, which in itself may be a form of participation, yet remain unknown to the community (the term ‘community’ is here used more loosely to refer to online collectives or groups of users sharing an affinity). Moreover, observation of practices online may include non-invasive
forms of embodied participation, such as participating in the viewing experience of a video. Thus, participant-observation online can take on different meanings and entail different practices than what is traditionally thought in ethnographic practice.

5.4.2 Blogs

The empirical material for Article I was collected from 12 plus-sized fashion blogs covering seven Western countries (UK, US, Australia, Spain, Sweden, Denmark and Finland), written in five different languages. In 2010, there were approximately 150 million blogs on the Internet (Lovink, 2011: 95), forming a vast blogosphere. The democratic potential initially attached to the Internet had a role to play in making blogging a popular activity and the blog a popular medium (Travers Scott, 2010), and is still a practice used for social action (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). However, this kind of techno-enthusiastic discourse emerges regularly around each new type of communication technology (e.g. Gitelman, 2008), expected to expand “the communicative agency” through technology, and allow “more individuals to better join the mediated public sphere and thereby participate in civic deliberation” (Travers Scott, 2010: 273). The ability to participate in the ‘visual public sphere’, however, requires the ability to read, interpret and produce images, but can potentially enrich and diversify the social media archives of representation (Pullen, 2011).

Blogging is a form of publishing. As personal accounts, the blog can also be seen as a descendent of the diary (Rettberg, 2014, 2017a; Chittenden, 2010; Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004), where the visual and the written modes of representation intertwine (Chittenden, 2010). Lovink (2011: 98-99) argues, that despite their format, blogs are more akin to speech, constituting “digital extensions of oral traditions more than [] a new form of writing”. Blogs can be seen as recorded conversations one has mainly with oneself, filled with recounts of the everyday as bloggers as subjects monitor, record and store their everyday lives: blogs are thus generally deeply personal endeavours, even if executed anonymously (Lovink, 2011). However, they can also be seen as repositories of continually updated writing, where the comments constitute the blog as much as the actual posts (Booth, 2010; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004; Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005); in this view, the blog is a collective rather than an individual effort, produced collectively by the community in question.

Blogs come in various genres (see Lüders, Prøitz & Rasmussen, 2010, on personal media genres; Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Leppänen, 2015, on dog blogs and authenticity). The blogging community examined in Article I is one of plus-sized fashion bloggers, and as such, it belongs at the same time to what has been called the ‘fatosphere’ (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013) but also to the wider genre of fashion blogs (Pedroni, 2015). Although using fashion in self-construction is not a new practice (e.g. Callero, 2003), fashion blogging is a relatively new media practice, a way of reaching a bigger
audience for both sharing and gaining cultural and symbolic capital (McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013; Pihl & Sandström, 2013).

In addition, blogs often contain selfies (e.g. Tiidenberg, 2015; Murray, 2015), which, according to Rettberg (2014), continue in the tradition of self-portraits visual artists used to produce. Although studies have found women’s selfies on social media to be resistant and empowering (Murray, 2015), some argue society “disciplines digital self-representations such as selfies and blogs through ridicule and pathologising” (Rettberg, 2014: 1), being often dismissed as a narcissistic practice, which Pedroni (2015) argues results from not being familiar with the internal logic of the blogosphere. Posting selfies is a practice of ‘voluntary vulnerability’ (Tiidenberg, 2015) as the blogger can never know for sure who the audience consists of or what their reaction will be like. Photos do, however, have a significant role in constructing identity and memory, but also in forming social bonds (Van Dijck, 2008) as well as constructing counterpublics (Pullen, 2011; Connell, 2013) on social media.

Personal fashion blogs (including plus-sized fashion blogs) nevertheless constitute a constructed space enabling circulation of alternative visions of femininity (Rocamora, 2011; Connell, 2013; see Chittenden, 2010), yet blogging has been found both empowering and limiting. Via imagery posted on the blogs, the body acquires particular significance in fashion blogging where the “body serves as a critical site of identity performance” (Chittenden, 2010: 507; see also Titton, 2015), lending itself to mediation and expression of cultural capital (Pedroni, 2015); however, while potentially empowering, the body as a vessel of accruing capital has its drawbacks (see e.g. Skeggs, 2004), not least because this renders the self subject to differential value accumulation, but also subject to shifting criteria as per what counts as valuable. The self as is, then, has no value outside such a system, and this contributes to constructing some types of self as inferior.

Fashion blogging, in particular, functions as a site where personal interests intersect with commercial interest (Pihl & Sandström, 2013; Titton, 2015) in complex ways as bloggers create value not only for themselves but also for the market by way of generating monetary value. Blogs are cultural artefacts implicated in processes of self-construction (Siles, 2012), and on fashion blogs self-fashioning meets hegemonic dress practices (Titton, 2015), illustrating the ways in which fashion and consumption are both implicated in self-identity. One term for the subjectivity produced by (and for) fashion blogging is called ‘fashionable persona’ which is a “situated, narrative, and performative character developed by bloggers specifically for their blogs [] anchored simultaneously in the blogger’s self-identity and in the enactment of collective cultural narratives” (Titton, 2015: 202). These cultural narratives regularly contain regulatory norms pertaining to the female body, for example size, which on plus-sized fashion blogs are explicitly contested and negotiated.

The empirical material from the 12 ‘fatshionista’ blogs was collected over a period of 6-12 months ranging from 2013 to 2014. During this time, we the authors read blog posts carefully going through various blogs, examining the visual material
posted on the blogs in addition to the texts. Blogs clearly falling into the genre of a fashion blog, and more specifically, plus-sized fashion blog, were selected: thus, each of the 12 blogs selected for analysis exhibited expressions of similar interests, mainly that of fashion, but sometimes also of general lifestyle tips. They typically also include accounts of the everyday life and everyday experiences, related to, for example, shopping experiences (regarding choice or range in plus-sized items, treatment as consumers in shops, either online shops or physical shops, finding new brands), prejudice, discrimination or harassment due to body size, fashion events, or healthy eating and exercise. One of the regularly occurring themes is #OOTD, Outfit of the Day, which usually comes with contextualisation regarding the choice, event the garment is suitable for (e.g. work, leisure, weddings), and other fashion information (e.g. retailers, etc.).

All the blogs, as the analysis presented in Article I shows, are narrative constructions of a self reborn through self-acceptance found through relating with the plus-sized blogger community and realised collectively via complex consumption and media practices and the reworking of existing imaginaries.

5.4.3 YouTube

The empirical material analysed in articles II-IV was collected from YouTube, a video-sharing social media platform (see 5.6. Summary on materials and methods). Fan interaction in various social media and fan sites, fan productions on YouTube, and social media activity around the Steve Jobs digital memorial video (commenting, sharing) together with various other digital memorials with their fan discussions (as well as interaction with non-fans) were observed in netnographic fashion over the period ranging from 2012 to 2014. The memorial video and the user commentary is, in the three research articles, approached from different perspectives: while Article II aims to shed light on fan practices of mourning online as resembling religious practices with the digital artefact acting as a threshold to the sacred, Article III focuses on the actual mourning of the fans. It discusses how the mourning fans are positioned in the framework of normative grief as disenfranchised, and how social media offer a relational space for the alleviation of this condition (see also Gibson, 2015). Article IV takes up the issue of community and inter-group dynamics by way of linguistic inquiry and unpacks the discursive strategies of alignment and disalignment.

As YouTube concentrates on videos, it privileges the visual and auditory over the textual; in this study, both the video material and the related user commentary were collected and analysed: after the initial netnographic (Kozinets, 2010) period the empirical material was analysed using discourse analytic methods (CDA and Appraisal). Although YouTube as a context or object of study is not as common as, for example, blogs, YouTube has been studied from digital ethnographic perspective (Lange, 2008; Sumiala, 2011; Sumiala & Tikka, 2011, 2013), by performance
scho...d (Pullen, 2011), but also as vlogging (video blogging) in youth bereavement (Gibson, 2016). As media, YouTube offers versatility in terms of content (see also Miller et al., 2016) more than technical affordances.

In the present study the ethnographic method was found useful as it complements the more detailed discursive analysis of texts, adding depth to the analysis as well as to the interpretation of the social context in which the fan memorials are constructed. Defining what counts as participation in the digital context proves to be challenging: watching media, for example, is not merely passive, but rather video viewing in general involves active interpretation that shapes the reception of media messages (e.g. Leppänen & Häkkinen, 2012; Lange, 2008). Likewise, participating in the social reality shared by the fans and engaging in media practices favoured by the fans can also be classed as a form of participation, watching videos being one of the media practices the fans share. Sustained engagement is a useful criterion for ethnographically-oriented observation in a social media setting where participation is based on the understanding of the community practices and engaging with these; thus, watching videos and reading blogs can be categorised as forms of non-active participation (Markham, 2013a: 440).

The memorial video, originally uploaded to YouTube on October 13th, 2011, eight days after the death of Steve Jobs, can be classed as fan fiction; fan fiction is “a performative practice through and with which social and cultural capital and identities can be ascribed” (Leppänen, 2009: 15). I began my netnographic phase at the end of 2012, in November: at the time, the video had been viewed 353,735 times and had garnered 680 user comments. At the end of my netnography, the views had increased to 362,763 and the comments to 844, telling of the enduring appeal of commemorative videos. New comments are still arriving, although not so often, and usually mark the day on which Steve Jobs died. The user commentary is diverse: while the video as a digital memorial is set up by a fan, for fans, it also invites divergent voices. Commentary renders the media text open to interpretations: user commentary provides a useful source of multiple voices that resonate around a common topic or a source text. Lovink (2011: 55) notes how the comments that “circulate around the static, inflexible source text” can be seen as more informal and fluid interpretations and reaction to the original, and as such are also “unfinished” in nature.

Although YouTube is at times categorised as a social network site (e.g. boyd & Ellison, 2008; Lange, 2008), the interactional affordances are limited (however, see Gibson, 2015). Partly this is an issue of technical affordances and interface design, yet, as noted by Leppänen and Häkkinen (2012), YouTube offers semiotic resources also for the construction of ‘the other’ for the purposes of mocking and ridicule in the name of humour, if also opportunities for counter-discourses. In addition, the networking opportunities are limited due to the strong contextualising effect of the videos that construct a specific social context and a mode of participation (primarily) as a viewer. This contextualising capacity shows how digital artefacts participate in the construction of imagined communities, giving rise to a strong
sense of communal boundaries, as discussed in Article IV, and the rendering of some users contextually congruent while some others incongruent. The imagined community is, however, connected by viewing and sharing practices, by practices of circulation: more than by way of direct verbal interaction, these imagined communities are engaged in the sharing of ‘visual discourses’ (Sumiala & Tikka, 2011), held together by imaginaries they share. Furthermore, the digital artefact is infused with ‘affective capital’.

In a more sinister take on the wider societal role of user commentary on social media, Lovink (2011: 57) names today’s ‘comment culture’ the product of a “techno-secular age” that aims to exercise control in the form of surveillance over participating members of the society so as to check in on them, their interests, and their topics of choice; for Lovink, this is an “amoral form of participation”. Although digital artefacts construct the social space and provide the context, as much as inviting for community, media texts invite to disagree (discussed in Article IV): perhaps not surprisingly, much of the commentary on YouTube quickly flares up, transforming the space of commentary into an ideological, racial and gendered battleground (see Rettberg, 2014).

Commentary is, however, an essential part of the content. A wider media-ecology viewpoint on media use and media interpretations view online comments an integral part of the various reading(s) offered by media content and its ‘network effect’ (Lovink, 2011), rather than being an additional element or somehow ‘inferior’ to the ‘core’ content. Similarly, interacting through comments “provides another way for participants to establish meaningful social connections” (Lange, 2008: 378); those participating more actively in video viewing and sharing often share “affective energies” (Sumiala & Tikka, 2011) that also have a function in the formation of imagined communities.

The “logic of remediation in the circulation of images is deeply embedded in YouTube’s logic” (Sumiala and Tikka, 2011) whereby media content is circulated via other media. The speech delivered by the late Steve Jobs at Stanford in (2005), popularly referred to as ‘the Stanford speech’, is also readily available on YouTube in various forms and renditions. The original video uploaded by Stanford University 7th March, 2008, has garnered over 26 million views which tells of Jobs’ continuing appeal and popularity (see also Streeter, 2015).

The memorial video examined in this study is likewise a circulation of his Stanford speech (2005), edited for maximum affective value representing the life of Steve Jobs as a narrative construction in retrospect (van Dijck, 2013a). The speech is edited to include inspirational messages encouraging the viewers to have the kind of life they want, to follow their hearts, and not to live someone else’s life. Visually, the video features various photos of Jobs, showing him both at work with Apple products as well as at leisure. All the time in the background plays music composed by the video’s creator (and uploader) that s/he sampled from Apple sounds (only). The ‘song’ has also been featured on radio in the USA and was also available for download on iTunes.

This particular video chosen for the study was viewed repeatedly and analysed
in relation to the other Steve Jobs memorial videos available on YouTube in the spirit of netnography. The Stanford speech is also available online as a transcript, which I read in its entirety to see where the video snippets were from, and to see the overall context of the original text Steve Jobs delivered at Stanford. The video content and the user commentary were both analysed first using content analysis (Article I) with the information gathered during the netnography, and then analysed using discourse analytical methods (CDA and Appraisal).

The contextualising effect of the memorial video is clearly recoverable even when presented in plain text mode: the music, as already mentioned, features Apple product sounds only, adding to the affective effect and alignment-producing capacity of the video. I have included the lyrics of the memorial video tribute below, although for research ethical reasons I have not included the name of the author (all the snippets are recycled and recontextualised from Steve Jobs’ speech at Stanford, 2005):

```plaintext

don't lose faith
don't settle
stay hungry
stay foolish

don't lose faith
I'm convinced that the only thing that kept me going is that I loved what I did
you've gotta find what you love
and that is as true for work as it is for your lovers

your work is gonna fill a large part of your life
and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work
and the only way to do great work
is to love what you do

don't settle
for the past 33 years I've looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself
if today were the last day of my life
would I wanna do what I'm about to do today
and whenever the answer has been no for too many days in a row
I know I need to change something

remembering that you are going to die
is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose
you are already naked
there is no reason not to follow your heart

no one wants to die
even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there
```
and yet, death is the destination we all share
no one has ever escaped it
and that is as it should be
because death is very likely the single best invention of life
it’s life’s change agent
it clears out the old to make way for the new

and some day not too long from now
you will gradually become the old
and be cleared away
your time is limited
so don’t waste it living someone else’s life

don’t lose faith
don’t settle
stay hungry
stay foolish
because death is very likely the single best invention of life

Although user comments are frequent on YouTube, characteristic of it even, not all media texts provoke or entice commentary. Also, not all texts allow commentary. Usually arising from institutional decision-making to stunt discursive participation around a given topic, comments may be subject to moderation so as to keep the univocal tone and ensure control over meanings, as is the case with the Steve Jobs memorial website put up by Apple on their corporate website, discussed next.

5.4.4 Steve Jobs memorial page on Apple website

Apple set up their own memorial page on the company website for the memory of Steve Jobs. The memorial is aimed at fans and consumers who wish to express their last sentiment to the former CEO of Apple. According to Apple, over a million messages have been posted on the memorial page, which is still up and can be found at http://www.apple.com/stevejobs, over five years after his passing (at the time of writing). Most consumer messages posted on this page are expressions of deeply personal feelings (see also Bell & Taylor, 2016) of loss and gratitude, and tales of Apple technology’s impact on their lives (for example FaceTime). The prominent theme is the sense of loss of what they feel was a friend, and thus, a personally meaningful relation. Another theme is a sense of inspiration that came under threat with the passing of Steve Jobs.

The consumer messages posted on the company memorial page were used as empirical material in Article II together with the YouTube memorial video comments discussed in the previous section. The webpage was observed in netnographic
fashion over a period of one year 2012-2013, until it became clear what kinds of messages the site contained: in other words, the site was observed until the observation of content reached a saturation point, until there was no longer new types of messages to be recovered. Naturally, with over a million messages, these were not collected in any systematic (using a code) fashion: rather, I made notes of the content in terms of the sentiments expressed and copied some of the messages over into my notes, and some were also used as examples in Article II.

Website memorials not only serve to immortalize the deceased, they also function as celebrity webshrines (Andsager, 2005). Webshires tend to magnify the celebrity as well as build a community among and for the mourners and thereby help negotiate conflicting feelings over the death. Commemorative posts in online memorial pages come in a variety of forms. Klastrup (2015) categorises commemorative posts on online memorial pages into three types: conventional and formal expressions of mourning (e.g. RIP messages), expressions of sympathy toward the family, and expressions of griever’s own sentiment.

The Apple memorial site exhibits all three types. These range in length from simple ‘RIP Steve Jobs’ messages to lengthy biographical accounts specifying the ways in which Steve Jobs and/or the Apple products have touched and/or changed the individual’s life for the better (for example, very personal tales of fighting cancer or battling crippling unemployment or other dire life circumstances). In addition to the three types specified by Klastrup (2015), there is a fourth type (as illustrated by Article III), typical of celebrity death, and that is the shared evaluation of the celebrity’s impact in the world. It is in these commentaries that the ideological alignment is constructed.

However, unlike the YouTube user commentary on the memorial video displaying a variety of different voices and a heteroglossic discursive environment, the Apple corporate memorial page is most likely moderated by the company as no negative posts appear in the stream of commemorations: all sentiments are positive and there are no disagreeing voices. Thus, there is no conversation like there is on the YouTube thread, no contestation or negotiation of meaning. The fan sentiment prevalent on the memorial page supports the fan sentiment found on the video commentary.

5.4.5 Secondary material: Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest

Digital ethnography entails ‘roaming the Internet’, and numerous different fan sites as well as ‘fatshion’ blogs were observed, even if not included in the final analysis. Exploring the research object widely is helpful for the purposes of contextualisation, and numerous secondary material were examined while not included in the analysis. For Article I on fashion blogging, these include the photo-sharing site Instagram, where the plus-sized fashion bloggers post and share images of their outfits as they model these. Fatshion images tagged with the hashtag #fatshion
and #fatshionista, as well as the hashtag #OTD or #OOTD (i.e. ‘Outfit of the Day’) were examined, but not systematically collected or analysed as the focus was on the blogs, the texts and the images. Likewise, Pinterest is used for image sharing with photos tagged with #plussize #OOTD or #fatshion.

In addition, the micro-blogging site Twitter was examined in a similar fashion. Twitter, a social media platform with messages of the length of 140 characters, facilitates wide circulation of social media content, usually publicly shared to one’s follower base. It is also possible to protect one’s tweets from the public eye by setting the account as private, however, this is not common as the ideology of the platform favours open and public conversation. Twitter was searched using the hashtags popular among fatshionista bloggers, mentioned above, but also in the context of the Steve Jobs research using hashtags #SteveJobs, #RIPSteveJobs, #RIPSteve.

5.5 Methods

The methods of analysis used in all the independent research articles fall under the umbrella term of discourse analysis (DA). The two discourse-analytical approaches used in this thesis are Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Appraisal analysis that is rooted in the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) tradition.

Both of these discourse analytical perspectives are text analytical, that is, they focus on analysing the details of language use. Fairclough (1995b: 10) points out that textual analysis “presupposes a theory of language and a grammatical theory”, and the choice of which framework to use falls upon the researcher. Fairclough, advocating systemic linguistics, notes that as a functional theory, SFL has the advantage of examining the structure of language and how this relates to the social function of language: it thus examines the relationship “between language (text) and social structures and relations” (Fairclough, 1995b: 10). I will next discuss each in turn.

5.5.1 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analytical approaches share the idea of language as social practice (Fairclough, 1995b; Wodak, 2002; Matthiessen & Halliday, 2004; Martin, 2000; Gergen, 1999a), and meanings as emerging in interaction and being constructed in discourse practices (see e.g. Angermuller, Maingueneau, & Wodak, 2014). As an umbrella term, discourse analysis covers several strands of research methodology, all emphasising the “relevance of language practices in constructing the social world” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 228). Thus, social realities are seen as constructions, constructed through discourse and communication.

Discourse analysis in digital contexts can be seen as continuing in the footsteps of computer-mediated discourse (CMD). Linguist Susan Herring (2001: 612, emphasis in original) has carried out extensive research on computer-mediated discourse, and
Research design

According to her, CMD differs from the wider, computer-mediated communication by having a “focus on language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use of methods of discourse analysis to address that focus”. The view that “societal institutions are themselves constructed and maintained through discourse” is nowhere as evident as it is in online interaction where communities and social structures are discursively constructed (Herring 2001: 624).

Furthermore, in terms of identity and self-construction, the Internet “provides a unique space for the construction of identity in that it offers anonymity and an exclusively discursive environment” (Markham, 2004b: 373). However, the claims that online interaction is somehow inherently egalitarian simply due to its computer-mediated nature should not be taken at face value as the “pre-existing social arrangements carry over into cyberspace to create an uneven playing field, and computer-mediated communication can be a tool of either oppression or resistance” (Herring 2001: 625), evidenced also by the studies in this dissertation.

Critical Discourse Analysis was used in the research articles I, II, and III (see Angermuller, Maingueneau & Wodak, 2014, for overview of discourse studies). Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is concerned with examining social inequality, power relations, the ways in which power and ideology are employed and the ways these manifest in text, but also aiming to remedy unequal conditions and structures by making these more transparent (Fairclough, 1995b, 2003; Chouliariaki & Fairclough, 2003; Angermuller et al., 2014; Wodak, 2002). As on of the aims of CDA, a “critical analysis of contextualized texts and images should consider the many possible readings by different audiences” (Wodak, 2006: 6 emphasis added; see also Fairclough, 2003). Moreover, texts are rarely “the work of any one person” (Wodak, 2002: 10), resulting in negotiation of differences and of meanings in text and at the level of language while drawing on wider socio-cultural meanings. CDA thus represents a form of sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) with research orientation on interaction as well as the intersection of language, culture and society.

CDA has a keen interest in power and ideology, in making ideologies transparent or visible as ideologies (e.g. van Dijk, 2001a, 2001b; Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b). Power resides in the use of language; language is thus not neutral but offers a myriad of choices for the expression of meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Eggins, 2004). According to Fairclough’s (1995b: 74) framework, discourse comprises three elements: social practice, discoursal practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and text. Fairclough (2003: 129) characterises discourses as being “distinguished both by their ways of representing, and by their relationship to other social elements”, and the ways of representing are recoverable in terms of the linguistic features, which in turn “can be seen as realizing a discourse”. As ideologies are often not delivered explicitly, one of the aims of CDA is “to demystify discourses by deciphering ideologies” (Wodak, 2002: 10), often implicit in discourse. CDA research is thus particularly concerned with the study of implicit or indirect meanings, such as presuppositions, implications and allusions.

The ways in which meanings are naturalised, as well as what these things are (and
contrary to this, what things are consequently naturalised as somehow deviating from this norm, and thus seem ‘unnatural’) are among the central concerns of discourse analysis generally, and CDA particularly. For example, the naturalisation of discourses purporting ‘thin as ideal’ makes ‘fat’ seem deviant (Article I); similarly, the contemporary grieving framework naturalises intense mourning and memorialisation of family members and loved ones, rendering fan grief unnatural (Article III). Indeed, naturalised discourse conventions are a “most effective mechanism for sustaining and reproducing cultural and ideological dimensions of hegemony” (Fairclough, 1995b: 94).

As a discursive process, naturalisation works to raise some ideological representations to the status of common sense, and, crucially, renders these invisible as ideologies (Fairclough, 1995b). While some meanings seem ‘normal’, naturalisation arises from language use and the choices made regarding the selection of meanings, and is thus closely tied to power and hegemony: for example, certain interest groups occupying a position where they are able to manipulate discourses favourable to them (e.g. political power). The ideological dimension often goes unnoticed by the individuals occupying the subject positions (Fairclough, 1995b); ideologies are thus belief systems that transcend the individual and are not personal beliefs. In addition to their implicit character, ideologies are also linked to and draw on emotions, being often delivered through persuasive or manipulative rhetoric (Wodak, 2006).

Language, then, is versatile when it comes to power: not only can it be used to construct, maintain or express power, it can, likewise, be used to challenge, subvert and re-negotiate the existing power relations. Wodak (2002: 11) points out that power is “about relations of difference” and more importantly about the ways in which these differences filter down to social structures. Warning against engaging in simply moralising when analysing texts using a CDA lens, Wodak (2006: 9) suggests researchers work “in an interdisciplinary fashion, multi-methodically and on the basis of a variety of different empirical data as well as background information”. Being interdisciplinary means to “transcend the linguistic dimension (in the strict sense)” and to include the historical, political, and sociological dimension in the analysis and interpretation of specific discursive phenomena (Ibid.). This thesis has aimed to do just that and combines linguistic analyses with a wide range of theories from the fields of social and cultural studies as well as media and Internet studies.

Appraisal analysis (Martin & White, 2005; Martin, 2000; Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin, 2004), although different from CDA, shares common ground with other socially oriented discourse analytical methods. Appraisal analysis was used in research articles II, III and IV, with Article IV presenting a more detailed linguistic analysis and application of the method. Broadly, Appraisal can be defined as “an account of the resources of evaluation and intersubjective positioning” (Martin & White, 2005: 161), which makes it an ideal method for analysing belonging (see Martin, 2004) and the resources offered for belonging by the online context (see Zappavigna, 2011, 2012, 2014). Appraisal has been used to examine identity (O’Donnell, 2014), and it has also been used in conjunction with critical discourse
analysis (see Lassen, Strunck & Vestergaard, 2006). Initially developed by Martin and White (2005; see also Martin, 2000), Appraisal is a method of disinterring evaluation from text as this pertains to the stance of the writer to the reader, the text, as well as to wider social, cultural and ideological positioning. Appraisal, thus, adopts an *interpersonal perspective to discourse* (Martin, 2000; Martin, 2004; Martin & White, 2005), and as the Appraisal resources come in many forms, evaluation runs through the text and is thus not isolated or limited to evaluative lexis.

As Appraisal as a method of analysis is based on the SFL framework, it is useful to explain the basic tenets of SFL theory first (see e.g. Eggins, 2004; Thompson, 2013, for introduction to SFL). As a socially oriented theory of language, SFL is a suitable method for multidisciplinary research such as the current thesis, but it also offers comprehensive descriptive tools for discourse analysis. SFL was developed for the most part by M. A. K. Halliday (e.g. Halliday, 1993[1975]), starting in the 1950s, and has been further developed by his followers, for example, Martin (e.g. Martin & Rose, 2003) and Matthiessen (e.g. Halliday & Matthiessen 2004; see also Thompson, 2013). Drawing on anthropological and functional approaches to language (Matthiessen, 2012), the theory is inspired by the work of the linguists Malinowski and Firth (Eggins, 2004). Both emphasised the importance of context; Malinowski explored the semantic role of context of situation and the historicity of a word, whereas Firth further developed the concept of context to include a notion of linguistic predictability.

Matthiessen (2012: 436) underlines that SFL was developed to be an “appliable kind of linguistics”, that is, as opposed to the more theoretical strands of linguistics where the primary focus is on theorising language rather than on the social aspects of language use. By ‘appliable’, instead of ‘applicable’, Matthiessen aims to stress the important role of linguistic analysis and linguistic theory in addressing social and societal issues. Appliable linguistics, for Matthiessen (Ibid.), represents “a way of relating theory and application as complementary pursuits rather than as a thesis – antithesis pair destined to be in constant opposition”, and thus theory and application exist in a mode of dialogue. Furthermore, appliable linguistics, such as SFL, is at the same time *socially accountable and entails a critical stance* (Matthiessen, 2012) and is thus compatible with CDA. Fairclough (2003: 5-6), while calling for a more integrated linguistic approach through transdisciplinary dialogue, names SFL as his principal point of reference regarding text analysis precisely because of the social orientation of SFL, noting that SFL offers a “valuable resource for critical discourse analysis”. SFL theory is regularly used to engage with issues outside the realm of linguistics (for example, education and healthcare), which Matthiessen (2012: 438) sees as relating to “the different disciplinary currents that have informed and become part of SFL, including anthropology, anthropological linguistics, sociology, educational theory, neuroscience, computational linguistics, and AI”.

Systemic grammar is said to be functional because it has three metafunctions: these *three levels of meaning* are experiential (also called ideational), interpersonal, and textual. Looking at the different strands of meaning allows us to conduct finer
grammatical and linguistic analysis while being able to relate the linguistic phenomena to social behaviour: introducing the ‘prism’ metaphor to SFL, Firth noted how each level of language shows the meaning in a different light. The **experiential** level of meaning represents the social world, naming objects, events and people and describing ‘who did what to whom’: that is, how experience is represented in language use. This level of meaning is examined through transitivity choices. Transitivity refers to, for example, process types (types of verbs): verbs are categorised as per their type and thus we have material processes (e.g. to run, to write), relational processes that express way of being (e.g. to be, to have), mental processes (e.g. to think), verbal processes (e.g. to say, to ask), and behavioural processes (e.g. to dream, to cry), as well as existential processes (e.g. there is). Distinguishing between different process types allows a finer grammatical analysis: these concepts are employed in Article IV to examine the paradigmatic differences in processes (for example, fans use behavioural processes more than non-fans).

The **textual** metafunction can be used to analyse textual cohesion and how language functions as text, how it is organised. These are realised in text through choices regarding Theme and Rheme. Finally, the **interpersonal** level of meaning construes meanings about role relationships and attitudinal stance the speaker/writer/text assumes in relation to audience, other people, events and ideologies, realised through the Mood structure. Appraisal can be located in the interpersonal domain of language and thus approaches meaning from the perspective of interpersonal social and ideological positioning and stance. Although the three metafunctions communicate different types of meaning, together they make up the communicative intent.

Like Saussure, SFL utilises the notions of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations in the system of meaning potential, hence the name ‘systemic’, to refer to language as a semiotic system. Contrary to Saussure, Firth saw the syntagmatic and paradigmatic perspectives as **complementary** rather than opposite, a view that also greatly influenced Halliday (Firth’s student). Saussure saw meaning as also arising from opposites, which he calls **valeur**: the meaning of a sign is its value, i.e. how it is related to other signs (its opposition) in the system of signs. In building the SFL model of language, Halliday aimed for a more balanced view between the two perspectives of syntagmatic (more linear, language unfolding through time) and paradigmatic (language in any one point in time, of all the choices available to the ones that were made) relations than was offered by Saussure.

The concept of **choice** essential in SFL evolved into the **system network representation** of choices available in meaning potential, showing language as a resource for meaning making. Noteworthy is the difference of system network as a representation in comparison to a downward tree structure (e.g. Chomskyan) in that system network is not a compositional view. Furthermore, the system network may hold simultaneous systems, affording conjunctive entry condition to the system, e.g. the English 3rd person singular gender. Appraisal choices can likewise be represented as a system network (see Figure 5, showing Appraisal system as a system network).
Paradigmatic relations show the opposites (Saussure’s associative relations) or alternative choices of the expression or a word (or phoneme, etc.) that was prioritised by way of choosing and using it. For example, paradigm of transitivity choices (see Eggins, 2004: 193) would include a range of possibilities for verbs, the choice of which results in differential descriptions of action; likewise, choice among a range of nouns and similarly adjectives used to describe and evaluate these influence the representation of state of affairs that follows the choices made. To illustrate by way of example we can consider the paradigmatic differences between the following two sentences: “Steve Jobs was a genius”, and “Steve Jobs was the embodiment of greed” where the evaluative descriptions of Jobs as either a genius or greedy exist in paradigmatic relation to each other. Syntagmatic relations refer to a sequence, a linear organisation: structure can be defined, in SFL, as “the set of functional constituents in syntagmatic relation” (Eggins, 2004: 193).

Appraisal makes use of the basic terminology of the SFL framework and elaborates on the interpersonal dimension of language. Appraisal is thus interested in examining the ways in which evaluation as a meaning-making resource is used to position readers and audience, and how subject matter(s) are evaluated. Martin and White (2005: 32-33) situate appraisal “as an interpersonal system at the level of discourse semantics”, making it a discourse semantic resource “deployed to construe power and solidarity”.

The interpersonal system offers resources for the enactment of interpersonal
evaluation. Attitude forms the basic system with Engagement functioning as a resource for sourcing attitude, and Graduation being concerned with intensifying or softening of attitude. By employing various ‘dialogistic resources’, texts construe heteroglossic or monoglossic discursive environments (Martin and White, 2005: 99).

Martin (2004) reminds us that as, for example, solidarity is negotiated, it involves many different kinds of emotions and thereby different types of communities with varying degrees of membership. With Appraisal analysis we are able to analyse the ways in which affect is used to invite sympathy, to construct a community of mourners (in Article IV), and similarly how judgement (emanating from the oppositional voices) is used to cast disapproval. These processes of evaluation construct alignment and, equally, disalignment. Different communality types may be present in the same ‘text’, as “affect negotiates empathy (sharing emotions), judgement negotiates character (sharing principles) and appreciation negotiates taste (sharing preferences)” (Martin, 2004: 329). We see, then, how Appraisal analysis offers a powerful tool for analysing interaction, communality and relational existence in the digital context.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 586), in their socio-linguistic analysis of identity as emergent in interaction, define identity as “the social positioning of self and other” (see also Kulick, 2005, for a sociolinguistic approach to identification in interaction). Inspired by Appraisal analysis, the self can also be seen as evaluative positioning in emerging discourse, where evaluation is a feature of the intersecting relational flow and can be of different qualities (negative, positive, conflicting).

A corpus tool named UAM Corpus Tool, developed by Mick O’Donnell, can be used for carrying out linguistic analysis, including Appraisal analysis, based on the SFL framework. For this study all linguistic analysis was carried out manually. The tool also provides the researcher with resources for constructing network models, exemplified in Figure 6. As social media discourse is typically affective (e.g. Zappavigna, 2012, on Twitter discourse), Appraisal analysis is well suited as an analytical method for online material.

Figure 6. Example of network model for online belonging (tool by Mick O’Donnell)
5.5.2 Content Analysis

Content analysis focuses on themes and patterns (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 187) in order to produce an overview of the empirical material in a relatively systematic and comprehensive manner. Content analysis was employed in Article II and can be a useful method complementing discourse analytical analysis with its thematic categorisation, guiding the ‘zooming in’ on certain recurring themes, for example, religiosity and the monomyth.

Qualitative content analysis “involves interpreting, theorizing, or making sense of data by first breaking it down into segments that can be categorized and coded, and then establishing a pattern for the entire data set by relating the categories to one another” (Jackson, Drummond & Camara, 2007: 24). For the empirical YouTube material (user commentary around memorial video tribute to Steve Jobs), the categorisation started, as guided by the preceding digital ethnographic observation that included other sites of fandom, from discourses and practices of idolatry. In addition, what started to emerge from the material were themes related to death, commemoration, and mourning, but also, intensely affective relations with artefacts spanning the digital (e.g. memorial videos and inspirational memes) as well as the offline realm (e.g. Apple devices, Jobs’ keynote speeches).

Furthermore, it became evident (also through ethnography) that objects embedded in the daily practices of the fans were infused with differential meaning: a fan might be in possession of several Apple products able to carry out the same function (e.g. alarm, music, FaceTime, etc.), yet, there was a ritual dimension to the use of devices as they had specialised functions (some being only used during exercise, in the car, for travel, etc.). Memorialisation extends beyond the digital with fans reporting keeping mementos in the house (photos of Steve Jobs on the bedside table) or having shrines in the home.

As discussed in 5.4.1., Sandvig & Hargittai (2015; see also Postill & Pink, 2012) encourage researchers to engage in a proper discussion of the process, and include in the methodological account the struggles encountered during the research process: content analysis was found extremely useful at the initial stages when the empirical material seemed to ‘make no sense’ to the researcher as an outsider. Content analysis is suitable for analysing (textual and visual) digital material as it allows drawing up patterns for the purposes of comparison or for analysing material over a period of time. With a large amount of digital data, processing the material and dividing the material thematically at the initial stages of analysis helps focus and fine-tune research questions with the help of theory (Alasuutari, 2001). After the material was initially processed based on recurring themes, and divided into themes around life and death, the hero myth, gratitude, inspiration, recurring practises of (memorial) consumption, ritualistic engagement with artefacts, and emotive responses, a more detailed analysis of the evaluative resources was carried out by way of discourse analysis informed by Appraisal analysis (Martin, 2004; Martin & White, 2005).
5.6 Summary of materials and methods

The table below draws together the materials and the methods of analysis. Also, the table highlights how, in each research article, the relational process is contextualised.

Table 3. Summary of material and methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Insights of material</th>
<th>Understanding of ‘relational process’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fans on the threshold: Steve Jobs, the sacred in memorialisation and the hero within</td>
<td>YouTube memorial tribute video to Steve Jobs, 680 user comments, plus secondary sources</td>
<td>Netnography (2012–2013) content analysis, Appraisal analysis</td>
<td>Despite advocating self-acceptance and uncompromising individuality, Steve Jobs was an embodiment of aspirational self, the fan memorialising the hero-celebrity.</td>
<td>Post-mortem fan identity as fluid relational process ‘potential self’, or ‘ideal self’. Object relations and sacred consumption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially shared mourning: construction and consumption of collective memory</td>
<td>YouTube memorial tribute video to Steve Jobs, 842 user comments, plus secondary sources</td>
<td>Netnography (2012–2014) Critical Discourse Analysis, Appraisal analysis (attitudinal evaluation)</td>
<td>Disenfranchised grievers, the fans, manifest continuing bonds with the lost fan object, illustrating relational disruption but also continuity.</td>
<td>Disenfranchisement as relational property of normative grief framework. Continuing bonds with the deceased, coaction in relational process of healing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6 The relational self online: four studies on social media

The four research articles set out to examine how the self is constructed in a matrix of complex relations, what kinds of evaluations flow in these relations, and how the self is articulated in digital contexts at the intersection of consumer culture and new media. Each article takes a slightly different perspective. Imaginaries as terrain of aspirations offer consumers interpretative resources, and each article illustrates how various meanings are evoked, contested and negotiated for the purposes of rearticulating the present self as a response to relational changes, disruptions or rejections. The articles also touch upon the role of materia, for example digital artefacts, in relational construction of the self as well as collective sociality.

6.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I have treated consumer society as the context producing conditions under which contemporary selves are constructed, but also as a relational force. The decision to talk about individuals as consumers comes with its own baggage, implications as well as limitations. On a more general level, it may not be desirable to treat people as consumers: not only does this perpetuate this particular subjectivity as the desired or taken-for-granted one, but also foregrounds consumption as the organising principle and the principal activity of today’s society. Although this may well be the case, we ought to strive for, in our research as well as elsewhere, alternative ways of being and search for alternative subjectivities that are not necessarily implicated by the market (see Firat & Dholakia, 2016).

Over time ‘the consumer’, albeit a contested category, has nevertheless come to function as an important device for social and cultural change (Sassatelli, 2008). The consumer is not just one figure: as the conception of the consumer ranges from the sovereign rational consumer to the hapless victim of the market, there is nevertheless hope and room for the critical consumer (Sassatelli, 2006, 2008) with potential for political action, although this framing should not be taken at face value either (see e.g. Sassatelli, 2006). Yet, to talk about individuals as social media users, likewise comes with certain presuppositions, placing emphasis on people as users of technology and prioritising social media as the site of identity work. Although
an important facet of self-construction in the research projects of this thesis, my aim is to move beyond the level of the platform in exploring the contemporary articulations of the relational self: thus the choice to talk about consumers seems justified, while I acknowledge the obvious drawbacks.

The four articles presented in this chapter offer insights into particularised empirical cases of how the self is articulated on social media via consumption practices, and seen through the lens of a relational being “as the common intersection of multiple relations” (Gergen, 2011b: 317).

Article I focuses on tension between the marketized female ideal and the lived experience of plus-sized female fashion consumers. The study looks at how subversive identity work of a group of individuals unfolds on ‘fatshion’ blogs and how these bloggers (and readers) are brought together by shared experiences of marginalization as women with bigger bodies, but also as fashion consumers. Adopting a gender perspective in the context of marginalized fashion consumption, we examine how these plus-sized women blog their way into visibility by challenging and negotiating existing discourses around the bigger female body and fashion. Consumption of fashion thus takes on a subversive dimension as it is used to tackle marginalisation that is not only relational in origin and execution, but also culturally and historically situated, and thus open for negotiation.

Article II takes us into different consumption realm: fandom. In this study, fandom is viewed as sacred devotion with a secular focus where practices of fandom are found to resemble religious practices. Fandom as sacred consumption offers access to meanings that go beyond the ordinary and the everyday. Different material objects play a different role in different practices; practices of memorialisation intertwine with self-construction as objects as sacred act as a bridge between the past and the present, carrying into the future as vehicles and symbols of continuation (see also Radford & Bloch, 2012).

Article III approaches fans’ memorialisation practices from a different perspective; as an intense emotional relationship, where regular consumption of popular text acts as an indicator of emotional investment (e.g. Leppänen, 2009), fandom can lead to disenfranchisement due to relational disruption. Fans find social media a space for negotiation of disenfranchisement and legitimation of grief. Rearticulating the fandom in light of the past during memorising works to redefine the fandom and the sense of self as a fan. Where disenfranchisement is a relational dimension the self, arising from a dialectic between an individual and the social norm pertaining grief, collective memorising is a form of relational healing.

Although Articles II and III draw on the same empirical material, the two studies approach the topic from different theoretical perspectives. As is common in ethnographic work, empirical work often results in more information in the form of notes and observations than actually ends up as empirical material analysed in the research article. This was the case for me, too, and I have accounted for different insights in these different research articles.

Article IV adopts a linguistic approach to the fan/non-fan discourse on YouTube.
A more detailed Appraisal analysis is offered to examine discursive boundary building from an evaluative perspective. Evaluation regarding ethics, politics, and morality positions individuals. Fans share in positive, affective evaluation stemming from more personal experience, whereas non-fans negative judgement arises from general criticism against global economic conditions.

I will next discuss each research article in turn and conclude with a summary of the insights relative to the framework of the thesis and the argument presented in Part I.

6.2 Fashionably Voluptuous: Normative Femininity and Resistant Performative Tactics in Fatshion Blogs

Article I, Fashionably Voluptuous: Normative Femininity and Resistant Performative Tactics in Fatshion Blogs, published in the Journal of Marketing Management, explores marginalisation as a relation of exclusion in the context of consumption and the market, and how plus-sized female fashion bloggers resist and negotiate the peripheral position allocated to them. The study locates normativity in shared social imaginaries that act as reference points, showing how these feed into hegemonic ideals but also harbour subversive potential. Social imaginaries are permeable and accessible, for example, via consumption. Fashion blogs are not only depictions of lifestyle and consumption choices, but constitute a critical site of social and political action and contestation (Connell, 2013); moreover, plus-sized fashion blogs, or ‘fatshion’ blogs, have become spaces of active identity work purporting size equality, an end to fat vilification, while offering peer support as well as new modes of self-portrait (Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013).

In this article, co-authored by Annamari Huovinen, we examine fatshion blogging as both subversive identity work and as a form of consumer resistance. The blogs illustrate a case of transformative self-construction in the context of marginalised consumers at the intersection of commercial culture and counter-representations of traditional femininity. We adopt a gender perspective to examine the self-construction of plus-sized fashion bloggers as fashion consumers; we combine Butler’s (1993, 2004) performative perspective on gender and identity with Bourdieu’s (1986a, 1986b) notions of cultural and social capital. We focus on the discursive practices of constructing the self as a plus-sized consumer and examine how the fatshionista identity is constrained and/or enabled by normative frameworks; in addition, we explore the role of resistance in such self-construction. Here, we define consumer resistance in terms of repetition of subversive performative acts (see also Eräranta, Moisander & Pesonen, 2009), for example, the employment of fashion and hegemonic fashion discourses to subvert the notions of ideal femininity.

Female bloggers have been explored from the perspective of performativity before, with Blower (2016: 100, emphasis added) arguing more generally that “one cannot be online without ‘doing’”, and indeed, blogging as doing opens up new avenues for
exploring “the self as fluid and plural and from multiple perspectives”. The paper examines the process of fatshion bloggers reflecting on the differences but also the similarities they share relative to the mainstream representations of what it is to be a culturally intelligible woman. Indeed, advertising images have the capacity to shape gender identity (Schroeder, 1998), and thus gender representations circulated in and mediated by the media have a normative effect on gender identity. Acting in the face of a moral code is a testament to its existence (Alasuutari, 1999), being fat often being classed as an individual moral fault: the bloggers regularly describe how they refuse to live in shame and how they are proud to flaunt their bigger bodies.

Moreover, fat female bodies that do not conform to the feminine ideal are subjected to discursive and patriarchal control in and by the media (e.g. LeBesco, 2004), with Giovanelli and Ostertag (2009) arguing that media representations in fact serve to symbolically annihilate fat women as certain representations are prioritised while others are excluded. The plus-sized fashion bloggers, then, by showing their cultural knowledge of fashion, blog themselves into visibility by including representations of the fat female body in a favourable light in the landscape of normative representations of women.

The empirical material is collected from 12 plus-sized fashion blogs from seven Western countries, written in five different languages. As a method of analysis, we used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that allows the examination of social struggles, inequalities and power positions as these are expressed at the level of language (Fairclough, 2003, 1995a, 1005b; Lazar, 2007, 2008). CDA sees language practice as mediating social practices, as well as mediating naturalised ideological positioning. Focussing on how fashion consumption and online sharing practices figure in self-construction, the research questions are as follows:

1) What kinds of gendered representations are constructed on the blogs of marginalised fashion consumers, that is, on plus-sized fashion blogs?
2) What kinds of discursive practices do the plus-sized fashion bloggers engage in in constructing their identities as plus-sized (fashion) consumers?
3) In which ways is the ‘fatshionista’ bloggers’ identity work constrained and/or enabled by normative frameworks, and what is the role of resistance in such identity work?

In our analysis, we concentrated on visual communication to see how the images construct the fatshion blogger identity and the possible similarities with fashion and commercial images; on textual communication and how the biographical info describes the bloggers and in what way the bloggers bring up size, the fashion market, and evaluations pertaining to these; finally, we also examined how, as these two modes of representation intersect, the tensions arising from different tactics of identity construction emerge to construct the fatshion blogger identity as one that is contradictory and evolving. Furthermore, how the gendered identity representations on these blogs are at the same time subversive as well as submissive relative
to the hegemonic female ideal. Thus, we view these two modes of communication as working together as a semiotic resource used in constructing the fatshionista blogger identity as an ongoing semiotic process.

Our findings show that the subversive self-construction involves resistant consumer tactics that can be roughly divided into more explicit and more implicit tactics: while the explicit tactics prioritise the fat body and underline diversity, the implicit tactics are embedded in similarity; however, the bloggers draw on the normative framework to subvert the very discourses that are used to marginalise the plus-sized consumer in the first place. From the perspective of the relational framework, subversive performative acts are relational in nature, and the fatshionista community online (sometimes also offline) offers a context in which such resistant acts of subversion of hegemonic ideals is possible and, indeed, intelligible. Thus, the relational flow is affirmative which supports the construction of new representations. Furthermore, these resistant consumer tactics (de Certeau, 1984) function as a relational process, resisting the market positioning and offering. Similarly, as marginalisation can be seen as a property of relationship, where in different context the same subjectivity may not be marginalised, the blogger community fosters positive self-construction by acceptance, by collectively rejecting demands for bodily change (see also Gurrieri & Cherrier, 2013).

Alternative constructions of feminine beauty are nevertheless embedded within and expressed via the mainstream material domain (e.g. Connell, 2013); similarly, experiences of exclusion and marginalisation stem from a positioning relative to the mainstream ideals mediated by, for example, social imaginaries. Here, we can clearly see the relational aspect where the sense of self, of being, is ‘derivative of relationship’ rather than the other way around (Gergen, 2009). The relational mode (see e.g. Emirbayer, 1997) is evident not only at the level of inter-group identification and relations, but on an intra-group level, too. When the inter-group (this being the one that is imagined, arising from the popular feminine imaginary) dynamics prove to be dissonant and excluding, the intra-group relations can serve to counteract exclusion and marginalisation and provide a basis for positive self-construction. The affirmative relations that hold in the alternative imaginary are thus co-constructed. This kind of identification with an imaginary, and more to the point, to that which is lacking in the imaginary, is illustrative of how social imaginaries mean both by that which is present and by that which is absent. Together, these two modes of representing come together to mean in a system of significations where the meaning is defined against what something is not.

The desired self comes into existence through social interaction, and not least through the recording of the new self in the photos and production of digital artefacts that narrate the journey and the self. Taking photos of oneself and sharing these is a form of constructing the self as well as the community in question (Tiidenberg, 2014): as media texts, the blogs as well as the photos they contain, are “not only material objects of attention and use in social life, they are also appropriated as subjects in imaginative constructions of the self” (Lindlof & Grubb-Swetnam, 1996).
These new constructions also populate the newly created imaginaries, bending, extending and altering the existing imaginaries.

Photos of the dressed up self form a major part of the fatshionista blogosphere. In fact, the fatshionista project is very much a project of the body. Although the fatshion bloggers turn the focus on the bigger body around, that is, they make a point of it rather than conceal it, nevertheless, the very objectification of women that feminists have been fighting against, argues LeBesco (2004: 68), “becomes the new dream state of the fat woman consumer” (see also Gill, 2007a, 2007b). Female blogging as a form of identity work (see also Chittenden, 2010), or as an *autobiographical* practice, has been found to underline and emphasise hegemonic notions of femininity, which our study confirms: even in their resistance, fatshion bloggers reproduce normative conceptions of femininity and feminine beauty while contesting others. Nevertheless, seeking acceptance in the market adds to the complexity of the self-construction of the plus-sized consumer; the intersecting and contradictory relations to be negotiated include, on the one hand, market rejection, but also personally felt social disapproval, on the other. To be included means you are no longer in the margins: even if this inclusion is into the realm of the market and the market-mediated, market-induced imaginary, it is, however, a welcome sign of approval.

In fact, such aspirational normativity, whereby subjects seek to be included in the realm of a normative way of life and of being, can present itself as a route for social recognition (Berlant, 2007). Complexity and contradiction are present also in how “the neoliberal subject is compelled to participate in society as both an enthusiastic consumer and as a self-controlled subject” (Guthman, 2009: 193). Self-control, in the context of the female body, often concerns body size and weight, but also appearance more generally (e.g. fashion sense); the fat body defies the norm and is regularly normalised as physically deviant (e.g. LeBesco, 2004). By showing their knowledge of fashion, the fatshion bloggers seek a way in to normalcy (Berlant, 2007) by way of one socially accepted form of control while rejecting some other demands for change.

Although we are witnessing the co-construction of alternative meanings and evaluations, the contemporary articulations of the relational self are nevertheless produced in and by power relations. This study illustrates how such counter-discourses are achieved by way of consumption practices, by way of reworking existing consumption practices and the evaluative repertoire attached to them; this can also be seen as work toward attaching exchange-value to the self as an improved version of the self, as an ideal self in the process of realisation that implicates the body: the fashioned self possesses more symbolic capital as it serves as a vessel of empowerment and a locus of “the process of symbolic translation” of capital (Chittenden, 2010). While social media afford possibilities for the formation of counter-discourses, these are constrained and shaped by the hegemonic discourses of value, albeit also enabled by them, as shown in Article I.

Personhood is not an equal category, as argued by Butler (1993), but some are esteemed as more or less valuable, value being a contextual variable. Skeggs
(2004: 4) argues how alternative value systems “cannot be framed in the shape of a self that is in any way interested in accruing exchange-value to itself”, yet she remains optimistic that even though self-production is, for example, class related, it is, nevertheless, possible “to produce a subjectivity from alternative use-values, [based] on living life with different set of values” (Skeggs, 2004: 91; see also Firat & Dholakia, 2016).

Often, access to recognition is, however, based on the ability to speak as well as the access to middle-class taste regimes (see e.g. Arsel & Bean, 2013; see also Lawler, 2004). The fatshionista bloggers examined in this study found a route to (self) acceptance to be rooted in mainstream fashion: however, focussing on fashion as a tool for empowerment is a contradictory move as it means at the same time that focussing on one’s appearances as the basis of acceptable personhood, which does not render the female subject free from evaluation, only shifts the focus from body size to taste. This is not to undermine the social imperative behind the fatshionista project, however, but it does show the inherent complexity of relational self-construction in the digital context, such as the fashion blog.

6.3 Fans on the Threshold: Steve Jobs, the Sacred in Memorialisation and the Hero Within

Article II, *Fans on the Threshold: Steve Jobs, the Sacred in Memorialisation and the Hero Within*, published in Myth and the Market, explores memorialisation practices of the fans of Steve Jobs from the perspective of sociology of religion (Eliade, (1959[1957]), combining this with literature on the hero myth (Carlyle, 1840: Campbell, 1949). In the modern, disenchanted world, as we are witnessing the increased secularisation of religion, people find mysticism in other places than religion or religious institutions (e.g. Cupitt, 1998), for example, in fandom (e.g. Jindra, 1994). As the sacred is experienced more and more in a secular context, consumer culture theorists have examined the mystification of the profane in the context of consumption (e.g. Belk, Wallendorff & Sherry, 1989; Bonsu & Belk, 2003; Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Bell & Taylor, 2016). In this article, co-authored by Johanna Moisander, we bring together the views of fandom as religious practice and consumption as a site of experiencing a mystification of the mundane, and adopt a view of fandom as sacred consumption (Belk & Tumbat, 2005). The article shows how in fandom, being a secular practice, the sacred dimension arises from particular meanings the objects gain in fan practices (see e.g. Bettany, 2007, for an account of relational and fluid ontology of consumption objects), but also from the ritual dimension of these practices. We also show how the fan object, Steve Jobs, becomes more and more an object of consumption in the process of memorialisation.

Fannish consumption, however, goes beyond physical objects (like phones, for example) and includes consumption of media texts, production of fan texts
(Sandvoss, 2005; Booth, 2010), but also the consumption of a celebrity figure. For Jenkins (2006), sharing in, and in the times of social media, sharing of the interest is what makes fandom as it transforms mere spectatorship into a cultural practice and personal experience into a participatory one. Furthermore, fandom allows marginalised groups to negotiate their own cultural conceptions and concerns relative to the mainstream representations (Ibid.).

The celebrity, as a modern construct, is to be distinguished from hero worship, argues Hollander (2010). The celebrity is driven by as well as constituted by fame and popularity, rooted in popular culture and the entertainment industry, whereas hero worship has its origins in myth. Moreover, the hero figure as a selfless entity is invested in the society, and unlike the celebrity, does not endorse or symbolise individualist values. However, we contend that approaching fandom through the lens of hero worship offers valuable insight into the contemporary world and Steve Jobs as the embodiment of contemporary values, and indeed, it is through the fans' own accounts that the hero narrative emerges. Albeit a celebrity, to his fans Steve Jobs represents a hero who had societal impact as well as the ability to invoke deeply personal feelings (see also Redmond, 2010). The fans and their memorialisation practices thus form the focus of the article, their ritualistic consumption of Steve Jobs and the Apple products, the co-construction of Jobs' post-mortem identity as the hero of our times, and how this hero narrative and sharing in fandom figures in the self-construction of the fans as they congregate on YouTube.

The empirical material consists of a video tribute posted by a fan on YouTube, consisting solely of sounds found on Apple devices and clips from Steve Jobs' speeches, as well as memorial comments posted on the Apple memorial page on the company website by fans and other people. The memorial tribute, at the time of the study, had 353,735 views and 680 comments, from both fans and non-fans, including some haters. The Apple memorial page, www.apple.com/stevejobs, according to the company, has attracted over a million commemorative posts by consumers all over the world. These two sources differ in respect to mode and affordances (YouTube caters to multimodality and sharing, Apple website does not), but also moderation: where the YouTube video commentary is more or less unmoderated and thus invites divergent voices, the Apple memorial site is very much moderated and consists of positive messages only.

Both of the digital spaces were observed in a netnographic fashion for one year, 2012-2013: also in the spirit of netnography, I observed many more fan sites and watched numerous other memorial videos on YouTube, read the related commentaries, and read the news coverage of the Apple CEO's death. The video chosen for a more detailed analysis was selected on the basis that it encompassed many of the features and sentiments of the fan discourse also observed elsewhere. Thus, it is a representative memorial video, but has garnered more comments, likes and shares than some other videos. Content analysis was used to organise the empirical material to recurring themes, such as commemorative messages depicting idolatry and hero-worship, tales of inspiration, aspirations regarding self-improvement, as
The relational self online: four studies on social media

well as recounts of mythic properties of technological devices (Apple products), affective engagement with technology, and recurring ritual use of artefacts.

The comments were then analysed using discourse analysis informed by Appraisal analysis to elicit the evaluation and attitude present in the text. The attitudinal stance manifests in text as positive or negative evaluation unfolding in the fans’ online memorialisation, including the discursive re-narration of Steve Jobs’ life. The research questions are as follows:

1) What kinds of online memorialisation practices do the fans of Steve Jobs engage in?

2) In what way, and to what extent do the fans employ the mythological hero narrative in their re-construction of the post-mortem identity of their object of fandom?

3) What role does the re-constructed post-mortem identity play in the construction of the fans’ own identity?

The findings of the study are organised into two broad categories and address, first, the construction by the fans of Steve Jobs as the hero of our times and his life as a heroic journey, and second, the spiritual dimension of the fannish consumption of Jobs in the memorialisation practices and ritualised revisitation. The hero myth is interwoven with religious narratives to varying degrees. The study showed how consumers mobilise the myth as a grand narrative to convey, construct and continue the fan relationship so important for the sense of self (see Sandvoss, 2005). Myth allows fans to imagine themselves in the hero narrative, and identify with Jobs as the constructed personification of a hero to both draw inspiration from and manage complex emotions of idolatry and grief. Personification also enables fans to access the hero within, the ideal self.

All the elements of the hero myth are recoverable from the empirical material (RQ2), which Steve Jobs can be said to have set in motion in his speech at Stanford, and to which many of the commenters allude to: first, the hero is born and the journey metaphor is retold, with modern-day obstacles and hardship; then, the fans discursively construct a divide between the fan object and themselves, granting the hero an elevated position and harnessing him with mystic qualities, as someone to aspire to; after death, the reverence continues and Jobs is constructed as an ‘ideal type’ the fans identify with, and indeed, in some cases the fannish consumption increases and the fandom strengthens. There is also a clear sense of change typical of heroes, and now this is attributed to Jobs. Last, the discursively constructed hero figure is everyone and no one, it is the image of the (unrealised) hero within (the fan), the potential projected onto the figure who embodied the myth, the fan object. In the words of Maffesoli (2007: 31), participating alongside heroes and other emblematic figures gives us a sense of “quasi-mystical communion, a common sentiment of belonging”.

In addition, the study looked at the memorialisation practices in terms of how these resemble religious practices of worship (RQ1). Drawing on Eliade’s (1959[1957])
account of the sacred and the profane, the sacred provides the point of orientation, this being Steve Jobs to the fans. We also established a boundary that in Eliade’s account not only constitutes the sacred/profane binary, but also allows accessing the sacred by way of a threshold. These threshold items range from memorial videos to various Apple devices. Memorial video anchors individual acts of remembrance, but also invites an anonymous congregation of fans as mourners and establishes the site as one of memorising and idolatry. In this way, the video becomes a digital shrine; it allows revisitation, and it enables collective sharing of sentiment and participation in fandom.

Death, for Eliade, is not a terminal aspect of life, but a qualitative difference in existence: the sacred and profane differ from each other qualitatively, the sacred transcending the mundane. Thus, in death, the fan object can gain a sacred status, but importantly, it is not the persona of Jobs per se, but what he is imagined as. As death is a form of separation, it constitutes a relational rupture and thus causes anxiety. Rearticulating the relationship helps to come to terms with the loss, helping the relationship continue, if in new ways. At death, fandom necessarily undergoes transition, and likewise the fan identity needs to be rearticulated. However, the identity of the fan object is also reconstructed as it is ultimately a reflection of the fans’ hopes, desires and aspirations. Thus, the role of the post-mortem identity of Jobs as co-constructed by the fans to the identity of the fans (RQ3) is important for several reasons: the reworked relationship allows continuation of fandom, but it also facilitates moving on in one’s life while maintaining this new and modified fan relationship that continues to be a source of support and inspiration.

Marking death with commemoration and ritual remembrance is a rite of passage that serves to signify transition, in this case from life to death. Rituals, including new media rituals such as this one, are also a way of organising new social order after the disruption brought on by the event of death (e.g. Sumiala, 2013) and they have the capacity to build community (e.g. Pantti & Sumiala, 2009). In this ritual process, specific objects gain sacred status as they are relationally implicated in this transition as they have a special function as threshold items: moreover, as noted by some of the fans, devices released after Jobs’ death do not possess the same mythical quality, but were seen as ‘mere’ objects.

Definitions of myth and mythology are diverse; Berger & Luckmann (1987 [1966]: 128) define mythology as “a conception of reality that posits the ongoing penetration of the world of everyday experience by sacred forces” whereas Gergen (2009: 392) offers an interpretation of sacralisation as a process of valuing. Indeed, the study shows how, according to the fans’ recounts, through (Apple) technology the fans everyday has changed: theirs is a deeply personal account of the effects of technology and the improvement it has brought to their lives. The influence, for some, has been so profound and life changing as to amount to a sacred force. Technology is thus evaluated in relation to the betterment of the everyday, but also relative to self-improvement and empowerment, if also inspiration.

The study illustrates how engagement with the mythic can act as a relational
resource for a self that emerges in a process of transition: that is, the myth is re-imagined as embodied by Steve Jobs, and the fan relationship gives rise to imagining the ideal self, in this article referred to as the hero within. By identifying with a celebrity, consumers aspire to emulate them in the hopes of attaining what the celebrity has achieved. Media has no small role in producing celebrity; in fact, celebrity embodies media power in terms of the division between being included in media, or being excluded from the media (Couldry, 2002, 2004). Steve Jobs evidently had access to media presence already due to his position as CEO and by way of presenting at the company product launches and elsewhere, but media coverage also contributed to the hero narrative by covering Jobs’ life events in a certain light. This image is perpetuated in the acts of memorialisation.

The study also investigates how material relations contribute to an emerging self and how consumption practices mediate relations with the material, including digital artefacts; for example, some fans recount their differential use of technological devices for different purposes, even though one device would do for all these purposes. Likewise, relational engagement with the digital video shapes the self. The study thus extends the relational approach to include the material as it, after gaining specialised meanings in ritual action, mediates symbolic meanings and provides access to these later on. Ultimately, the hero’s journey is a journey to the self: the fan object is a reflection of the fans’ hopes, desires, and aspirations, and as such, is subject to change as these conditions change. Thus, as a reflection of the self, the potential of the hero myth is objectified in and embodied by the figure of Steve Jobs.

6.4 Socially Shared Mourning: Construction and Consumption of Collective Memory

Article III, Socially Shared Mourning: Construction and Consumption of Collective Memory, published in the Journal of Hypermedia and Multimedia, continues with the theme of Steve Jobs fans, but instead of looking at the memorialisation practices from a sociology of religion perspective (as in Article II), the study explores the fans’ collective mourning on social media through the lens of disenfranchisement. Cultural, normative frameworks that govern grief posit restrictions as to how grief is viewed and what kind of grief is accepted as legitimate: grief and mourning are usually reserved for family members and loved ones.

Disenfranchisement in grief and mourning is described as the kind of grief that is not socially sanctioned (Doka, 1999, 2002), the reasons for this varying from status of relationship not being accepted while the person was alive (e.g. homosexual relationships, extramarital relationships, etc.) to relationships not being accepted as legitimate or ‘real’ on other grounds (e.g. fan relationship). Thus, grieving the loss of such unrecognised relationships is equally not socially sanctioned. Furthermore, extended public mourning is regularly frowned upon and judged as this does not
comply with the unwritten ‘grieving rules’ of our society (Doka, 1999; Walter, 2014) that often include the notion of grief as private (e.g. Walter, 2014), but also of a limited duration. Norms pertain as to whom to mourn, when, where, how and for how long (Doka, 1999), and thus extended public mourning of celebrity does not readily fall under normative grief. However, given the deeply personal bond fans form with their fan object, the loss is often deeply felt.

As memorials, YouTube commemorations are forms of temporary memorials that invite less structured forms of memorising; temporary memorials are, however, also subject to social and cultural grieving norms (Doss, 2008). As contemporary forms of remembering, digital sites like YouTube bring death and mourning closer and it can be experienced in the everyday, but also shared with an unprecedented amount of people. Death has become mediatized (e.g. Sumiala, 2010, 2013). This, however, often results in contention over commemoration as divergent views collide online (Walter, 2014): the worthiness of the deceased and moral value of the act of remembering are assessed and judged. Commemoration is a form of recognition that renders the death and the life lost worthy of remembrance, and thus commemoration is an act of assigning value: in remembrance the death is evaluated as important.

As not everyone agrees over the justification of public commemoration of figures like Steve Jobs, the fans’ grief is subject to ridicule. Indeed, disenfranchisement has been treated as empathetic failure (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002) whereby disenfranchisement emerges from the interaction between people, and thus, being of relational quality rather than a property of any specific type of grief as such. As a process, disenfranchisement is present in most cases of grief (Ibid.), but to varying degrees. In this study, disenfranchisement is likewise viewed as a property of a relationship, and thus, as a relational outcome it is not present in all relations the grieving party is engaged in. To this end, social media offers the fans a space for the negotiation and legitimation of their disenfranchised grief as they collectively work on their emotions and in the spirit of peer support enfranchise each other’s grief.

The empirical material consists of the user commentary of the memorial tribute on YouTube. The video, at the time of the study, had 360 059 views and 842 comments, as well as 3675 ‘likes’ and 198 ‘dislikes’. The video is widely shared in other social media platforms. I also carried out netnographic (Kozinets, 2010) observation over the course of 2012-2014, and consulted, for example, Twitter and Facebook using the hashtags #RIPSteveJobs for a more comprehensive understanding of the fan sentiment. The use of this hashtag has evolved over time and now appears in creative contexts, and may not anymore in all instances mean what the literal meaning stands for.

The comments were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis informed by Appraisal: CDA was applied for a macro level analysis to explore the ideological stances and tensions in interpersonal positioning, and Appraisal analysis on a micro level to further explore attitudinal evaluation, positive and negative, as well as alignment and disalignment. In addition, the object of evaluation, and the justification and reasoning for any given evaluative stance was explored.
Thus, in the context of disenfranchised grief in fandom, the research questions are as follows:

1) How, using discursive mechanisms and attitudinal alignment, is the memory of the late Steve Jobs collectively (re)created and negotiated?
2) What kinds of meaning(s) the fans assign to the emerging memory (i.e. representations of Jobs), the act of collective remembering and the community that follows?
3) What is the role of social media as a space where communities of weak ties may come together in support, and what is the role of commemorative digital artefacts in both mourning and in inviting such communion?

The findings show that as affiliation on social media may be based on a narrow set of shared interests, a sense of community that helps alleviate feelings of disenfranchisement may be based on weak ties (see Granovetter, 1983). Sharing in mourning thus establishes social media communities of weak ties as spaces of support and relational affirmation where legitimation of disenfranchised grief becomes possible. The study showed empirically how disenfranchisement is a property of a relationship, and how acceptance and inclusion, likewise, are borne out of social relations with others. Relating with distant others over something personally meaningful has an affirmative effect; the study finds that one of the restorative aspects of communal support is mutually recognised and shared affect. Sharing feelings and personal memories relating to the fan object leads not only to a sense of collective mourning (and thus not being alone), but it also facilitates co-construction of shared memory, a prerequisite of alignment. Likewise, memory is a pre-requisite of culture (see e.g. Taffel, 2016) and fan culture is no exception.

Social media users are engaged in co-action, resulting in co-production of new relational entities that enter as subjects into the imagining of the self. The comments represent the views of both fans and non-fans and the ideological tension is easily recoverable: the non-fans judge memorising a figure they take to be the emblem of capitalism. They criticise Apple’s business ethics and Steve Jobs’ moral conduct as the CEO of Apple. However, for the fans, the denigration serves to strengthen the sense of togetherness as opposition works to construct solidarity in the group under attack.

Death represents a disruption in relationship (e.g. Howarth, 2007; Seale, 2008), not the end of relationship (Refslund Christensen & Sandvik, 2015): the relationship continues after death, although the self undergoes reconfiguration to adjust to new relational state. Not only the bereaved, but also the deceased undergoes a transformation process and a new kind of relationship is forged. In the digital memorial, the fans initially construct the life of their idol as a post-mortem narration of a lived life as it is observed and interpreted by the fans. Fandom is a reflexive relationship, and the content of the narratives that become intertwined with the memorial tell of the transformative qualities of being a fan. Commemorations on
YouTube may be personal stories, but tell a story that extends beyond the person: they are cultural accounts of what or who is deemed important by that culture at a given time. Memorials generally mark that which they commemorate worthy of remembrance and, therefore, as important to the community.

The study shows how the relational self emerges at the intersection of the past and the future; it explores the importance of co-action and the construction of a shared experience in a process of enfranchisement. Co-construction of a memory is a relational achievement that allows the negotiation of the present situation of disenfranchisement in the normative framework of mourning. The study extends the relational approach to include collective re-negotiation of the historical as a relational resource for restorative self-construction at a moment of relational disruption.

6.5 Imagined Community and Affective Alignment in Steve Jobs Memorial Tributes on YouTube

Article IV, Imagined Community and Affective Alignment in Steve Jobs Memorial Tributes on YouTube, published in Systemic Functional Linguistics in the Digital Age, is a linguistic study that examines how discursive evaluative resources are used to create anonymous affiliation in a video commentary on YouTube. The study extends on article III, delving deeper into the analysis of interpersonal relationships and relational tension between ideologically opposing groups on social media, exploring the self as aligned with a specific collective. It thus addresses the issue of relational community dynamics and empirically shows how communal ethos, discursive and ideological homogeneity, is achieved in and through interaction with congruent others, but also through relating with oppositional others. The study illuminates the linguistic mechanisms used in constructing an imagined community and how the constitutive difference emerges in interaction that constructs the symbolic boundaries of fandom.

While boundaries of any fandom are difficult to draw, fandom being a matter of degree, it is useful to think of fandom in terms of emotional consumption. Fan practices regularly involve “an emotional investment in a given popular text” (Sandvoss, 2005: 7, emphasis added), arising from regularity of consumption; thus, both emotion and consumption are involved in the construction of fandom and we can tentatively think of the constitutive limits of fandom as falling somewhere at the margins of regular and emotional consumption of the fan object or text. Today, popular text, a term frequently used in fan studies, is not confined to what might traditionally be understood by the terms ‘popular’ or ‘text’; while celebrities like actors and musicians (Fiske, 1992, on Madonna as a popular text) are traditionally consumed as fan objects and ‘popular texts’, the very notion of celebrity is changing (e.g. Driessens, 2012) and now includes the likes of Steve Jobs, if also ‘ordinary people’ like YouTubers and bloggers.

Moreover, it is now recognised that not all fans or fandoms are marginalised, and
not all fandom is ideologically or otherwise subversive (Sandvoss, 2005), as some earlier theories suggested (e.g. Fiske, 1992). Sandvoss (2005: 7) critiques Fiske’s notion of fandom as virtually always oppositional to mainstream popular culture, saying how “fans’ practices, as well as the socio-demographic background of fans, are broader than Fiske suggests”, non-oppositional fans including sports fans that generally are not marginalised in terms of class or gender. Celebrity fandom likewise offers opportunities for diverse cultural positioning: the fandom of Steve Jobs is not oppositional in terms of the mainstream consumer culture and the underlying market ideology, yet within the fandom (largely produced by Steve Jobs himself) there remains the idea of oppositional market positioning (relative to, for example, Microsoft’s dominant market position).

In order to examine the affective dimension of Steve Jobs fandom, the study employs Appraisal analysis that is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics. It provides a more detailed account of the linguistic mechanisms used to construct relations of alignment and disalignment by analysing how evaluation and judgement demarcate ideologically motivated communal boundaries, while the relational tension at the same time strengthens the community as a relational source for the self.

Exploring the discursive contestation between differing ideological viewpoints as an ongoing process of community building and alignment, the research questions are as follows:

1) What kinds of processes of interpersonal affiliation are present in anonymous participation online?
2) What kinds of linguistic mechanisms are used to construct alignment and online belonging, or conversely, disalignment?
3) What is the role of inter-group interaction, affiliation and discursive negotiation of community in emergent communality online?

The relationship between language and community has always been central in social linguistics (Martin 2004: 323) and is seen as means for group affiliation and alignment. Thus, with Article IV, the thesis also aims to bring a more detailed linguistic analysis to the field of digital media research by illustrating the usefulness of socially-oriented linguistic description in analysing material collected by digital ethnographic means from social media sites. Thus, Article IV further elaborates this mechanism of affectual alignment in the context of anonymous collectivity while also showing how community is negotiated both internally (intra-group dynamics) and externally (as inter-group negotiation). The sense of community arises in a large part from the relational tension caused by the oppositional, incongruent others that function to increase in-group solidarity.

Appraisal theory shows how the relational self is constructed discursively by way of evaluation, and how evaluative resources can be used to construct communal belonging, to demarcate communal boundaries and, indeed, to construct a contextually congruent (or ‘culturally intelligible’) relational situation: I say
‘situation’ as what also emerges from the empirical material is that the relational quality, what flows in the relationships, fluctuates with every new comment added to the commentary. The online act of relating is thus not a static state of affairs, but an ebb and flow of emotions. Emotional bonding is characteristic of fandom, and a categorical division of degrees of membership of any given (fan) community is near impossible, but the shared level of intensity of positive appraisal gives an indication of the degree of identification.

The study unpacks the linguistic mechanisms (for example, differential evaluative processes) and discursive strategies used (for example, allusional rhetoric as invitation to community) for both relational self-construction and for community building in emergent digital spaces. The study shows how the discursive strategies that are used to construct alliance and alignment at the same time also alienate the ‘incongruent others’ and serve to construct disalignment: however, such oppositional relational forces ultimately enforce solidarity among the original group whose space it can be claimed to be, marked as such by the initial digital production and the audience the media text constructs and has written in it.

Article IV thus illustrates the important role of the constitutive other as this is an incongruent other and empirically shows how disalignment figures in self-construction as much as alignment does. Circulation of media-originated discourses as rhetorical allusions to a shared past serve as cohesive links building communality in the present, while aspirational allusions are used to re-represent the object of fandom but also as a mechanism for self-inspiration.

6.6 Summary and discussion of insights

The empirical studies have each explored relational configurations in the digital realm from various perspectives. Together, the studies shed light on how the self is relationally positioned and constructed in social, cultural, economic as well as material relations, shaped in a dialogic fashion in the context of today’s consumer society. The ways in which (various) media gives us a feeling that we live in a world with others (e.g. Couldry, 2012) is visible in these studies, not least due to media’s capacity to construct a landscape of significations people navigate and order their lives by, but also because of the new forms of sociality provided by new media technologies.

Imaginaries as constructed, if also constrained, landscapes of collective aspirations (Appadurai, 1996) invite imagined communities into affective communion (see Ahmed, 2004, for discussion of affective economy) where individual aspirations are re-worked and rearticulated collectively. At the same time, imagined communion produces imagined others that the social context may render ‘incongruent others’. It is therefore important to consider what kinds of “mediatized emotional bonds and collective imaginations” create our sense of belonging (Sumiala, 2013: 119).

In the case of the empirical studies we can observe how ‘aspiration’ is constructed
in the common imaginary shared by both the fashion bloggers and the celebrity fans, and how differential modes of identification (alignment or disalignment) constitute relations of inclusion and exclusion in the matrix of symbolic aspirations. Notably, two conflicting, yet mutually constitutive notions of the self emerge: on the one hand, ‘being yourself’ is strongly advocated, while on the other hand, the route to this is via ‘self-improvement’. These conflicting relational forces are negotiated at the site of consumption as much as at the site of the self as individuals form relational alliances with congruent others and negotiate relational tension arising from meeting points with incongruent others, or indeed from disalignment with popular imaginaries (such as the feminine imaginary that govern the female body). The self, then, constitutes a site of struggle where constitutive forces are constantly shifting, being articulated and rearticulated in the relational flow of the Internet.

The empirical material can be examined from the perspective of celebrity culture with its intricate interconnectedness to consumption and media: the plus-sized fashion bloggers are, in their own blogosphere, micro-celebrities who look up to and emulate other popular blogger personas, but they also draw on celebrity discourses and performances of taste in producing their own digital articulations of self while adhering to the logics of media visibility. In a similar vein, the celebrity fans form a group of affectively interconnected individuals who share not only in the idolatry of Steve Jobs, but in consuming him as an aspirational resource for self-construction.

These practices of imagining the self, and the self-construction practices we can observe online, reflect several temporal orientations: while the discursive and narrative construction of the self in digital contexts is indeed a construction in retrospect (van Dijck, 2013a) and thus a selective process subject to digital curation (see e.g. Pullen, 2011, for diversifying digital archives of repertoires of self), the orientation of the self as a discursive construct is toward the future, expressing the potentiality of the self: it is a self in the making, a self variably responsive to the multitude of relational forces flowing at the site of it. In this way, we could say the self as a relational entity in digital contexts occupies a place between the present and the future, along a continuum of what is and what could be, enmeshed in various discourses of aspiration, mediated by material practices of consumption, and articulated in accordance to and within the limits of current media practices.

This can be seen as an attempt to transform the self into something more culturally intelligible and into something that better fits the existing narratives of the self. If we adopt the view of self-conception as discourse about the self, that is, “the performance of languages available in the public sphere” (Gergen, 1994: 185) whereby the self is made culturally intelligible by way of narration within ongoing relationships, we can see how the existing cultural discourses of the self are not only inclusive, but also alienating and othering, rendering some unintelligible (e.g. Butler, 2004, 2006 [1990]). These selves are then negotiated collectively in the production of alternative discourses of the self for more inclusive practices of imagining.

Marginalisation, disenfranchisement and exclusion have in the empirical studies
been shown to be properties of relationships, and digital spaces afford the creation of new affirming relations where the self can be (re)constructed as an included, acceptable subject. Cultural narratives, as Gergen (1994: 199, emphasis added) notes, “form a set of ready-made intelligibilities; in effect, they offer a range of discursive resources for the social construction of the self”: I see these ‘ready-made intelligibilities’ as residing (also) in the shared social imaginaries, providing discursive resources for the social construction of the self, as well as offering opportunities for negotiation and rearticulation of pre-existing constructions.

The discourses of the self today place a heavy emphasis on individuality and responsibility for both the self and one’s life, on self-making. These discourses often masquerade as promoting diversity, tolerance and self-approval, as freedom to “be who you are”; yet, they emphasise self-work (e.g. McRobbie, 2004, 2011) and cultivating the self by various means of self-management, self-tracking (see Rettberg, 2017b), or self-disciplining that implies that the ‘self as is’ is somewhat lacking (e.g. Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2004, 2011) or perhaps presents as ‘culturally unintelligible’ in some way. While it may seem paradoxical to claim that ‘being yourself’ is connected to regimes of ‘self-improvement’ as they seem polar opposites, I however argue they are in fact constitutive of each other, and that it is not possible to ‘be yourself’ without first engaging in ‘self-improvement’.

In seeking individuality we all become made of the same mould; this is because what is at any point in time conceived as ‘the way for the self to be’ is a cultural and social construction of the acceptable and preferred way to be at that given time. Gergen (2006) reminds us of the cultural construction of what we accept as real or good, and similarly, the self and what is deemed to be a self that we accept as one that no longer is in need of cultivation is a social construction.

Celebrity fandom around Steve Jobs is a case in point. In his address to Stanford University in 2005, Jobs talked about life and death, work, love and dreams. It is, on the one hand, a narrative re-construction of his own life in hindsight, of “connecting the dots afterwards”, as Jobs expressed it, yet on the other hand, it presents as life advice foregrounding individual choice and control over one’s life. This is logical given that he was addressing new graduates. However, under closer examination we can recover who is the subject he constructs in his speech and what the subject is constructed as, but also, how he constructs himself and the relationship between these two. This is relevant in the context of this study because the memorial video is a rendition of this speech: in the video, Jobs’ speech is edited for maximum affective value, his words and phrases recontextualised, with his death adding a meaningful layer to him talking on the video about death as “life’s change agent” (lyrics of the video in 5.4.3.). Had Steve Jobs not died, these same phrases would still have been circulated as they indeed were during his lifetime, but his death escalates the profundity of his message which rests on the assumption that people today are stuck or entrapped in lives they do not wish to lead and have very little power to alter. What then happens is that through the discourse of love Jobs urges everyone to take (back) control of their lives, to find what they love and facilitated by this, do great work.
The speech thus constructs a subject weighed down by the demands of the society, but also constructs Steve Jobs as someone liberated from such burdens of the mundane everyday life, and most importantly, by his own action, by refusing “to settle”. Such a gift of having found one’s calling was already conceptualised by Weber (1958) in his articulation of the ‘charismatic authority’ (see Williams, 2003) which Weber saw as revolutionary force (Riesebrodt, 1999), yet some scholars have interpreted Weber to have implied that charisma shares a likeness with the ‘sacred’. Fulfilment of the calling not only endows the person with charisma but legitimacy as authority. However, we can also approach Jobs’ charisma from the perspective of celebrity capital, accumulated via repeated media presence to which he was a willing contributor with his Apple keynote speeches. Jobs became a symbolic authority to many who followed him and who were touched by his fervour and uncompromising character (also as reported to us by the media). More than Apple products, people consume(d) the persona of Steve Jobs and what he embodied: individualist aspirations wrapped up in a success story (see Watt, 2016). There is something irresistible and captivating about succeeding against the odds, which is how Jobs narrated his own life, and this resonated with his fan base.

A sense of difference is in this way constructed between Steve Jobs and those he addresses (discursively constructed in the speech): Jobs embodies the individualistic and liberated subject in control of his life, and the other hailed by Jobs’ rhetoric is necessarily constructed as the constitutive opposite, a subject who is trapped and controlled with no power over their own life. The division is also hierarchical: the one leading “the good life” assumes the authority of advising others on how to live, at the same time discursively constructing this life they have as inferior in some respects. Carried out in the name of inspiration and encouragement, the speech nevertheless underlies the importance of hard work, resilience, self-disciplining and self-management, implying at the same time that, first, by working hard the good life is attainable, and second, the others are currently not working hard so as to be in a position to enjoy the privileges of being in control of one’s life.

There is an inherent paradox in the imaginary constructed here where discourses of aspiration encourage the individual to be(come) ‘who they are’ and realise their (individualistic) potential and to engage in the life that belongs to them, yet also stress the profound role of working on the self in order to achieve this. It is not the case that the self as is should be liberated: on the contrary, one has to become the kind of self that is able to embrace “the good life” that is one’s own.

The field of possibility and aspiration, the field of conceivable action constructed in the shared social imaginary is not only constrained, it is paradoxical. It is also deeply evaluative: the imaginary constructs a semiotic space with differential valorisation of individuals based on their capacity to respond to calls for self-improvement. It includes some while excluding others. For example, even though the ‘imagined others’ are in the rhetoric of Jobs constructed as not (yet) occupying the position of ‘being oneself’, they are nevertheless presented as willing aspirational selves with potentiality. It is clear that while some relate to this positioning by align-
ment (as evidenced by the fan discourses of inspiration and self-aspiration), such positioning is also met with resistance (for example, as the non-fans reject both the imaginary of the aspirational self, but more so the capitalist framework within which this operates).

The individualist discourse of aspirational self-improvement calls for responsibility for the self instead of others. It is aspirational because it carries with it a promise: it paints an image of a self that ‘does not settle’, free from demands of contemporary working life and perhaps society. Thus, celebrity authority places itself as the goal and paves the road to uncompromising self-fulfilment with hard work: the practice of aspiring for a better future and a self that can be left unmanaged are, paradoxically, embedded in an imaginary that promotes working on the self and managing it in various ways (see also Nickel & Eikenberry, 2013). Rather than liberating, then, discourses of aspiration can be mobilised as a mechanism of control of the contemporary self.

The issue lies not so much with the organisation or structural properties of social imaginaries as systems of difference as with what the cultural values are that signify subjects as included or excluded, and the normative effect such evaluative repertoire has. The self as an analytical lens allows us to examine the prevalent social and cultural forces positioning individuals, and the values upheld in contemporary society. Although effectively ‘imagined’ and constructed, imaginaries are nevertheless not free from cultural, ideological, or emotional underpinnings.
7 Conclusions

Drawing on the notion of relational being and approaching the self as the intersection of multiple and conflicting relational forces, the present dissertation has developed a theoretical framework to better understand being at the intersection of consumption and new media. In order to explore, first, the complexity and multidimensionality of the relational flow, and second, the dynamics of negotiating diverse relational input, I have drawn on several disciplinary fields, including media anthropology and Internet studies, sociology of consumption and cultural studies.

The lack of interdisciplinary research in the field of media and Internet studies has been raised (e.g. Tsatsou, 2016), but the issue however is not limited to media studies, but also concerns the field of consumer studies to a certain degree. This thesis as an interdisciplinary endeavour takes a look at the contemporary society and our cultural climate through the lens of the self: I have adopted a wider scope within which to examine the particularised articulations of the self on social media presented in the empirical studies, while aiming to keep in focus the relational nature of our social existence. Therefore, I have in Part I sketched (some of) the contemporary conditions under which the relational self is constructed, while Part II presents the four research articles that each illuminate how, in the everyday, the self is a site of relational tension, struggle and continuous negotiation.

The studies show how not only consumption, but media logics are infiltrating our practices of imagining the self (e.g. via celebrity subjectivity) as well as the practices of producing the self. Thus not only media power in the form of imaginaries and their value-assigning capacity, media logics, too, intersect at the site of the self combined with market logic and market-mediated ideologies. Digital productions as artefacts form a chain of symbolic entities: one of the ways in which the chain of digital productions mean is by being connected not only to each other via social media but to social imaginaries. Construction and recognition of the self in the digital production is the very utility of the object as it attaches the individual to a whole chain of significations. This, to use Baudrillard’s terms, forms the object pathway that leads the individual by way of constraining them through a jungle of objects, at the same time becoming a part of the calculus of objects (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]: 27).

The thesis makes several contributions, which I will elaborate on below. In addition to discussing the theoretical and methodological contributions of the study, I will also suggest some practical implications of the study in the hope of offering
an increased understanding of the complexity of being online, of social media participation and the dynamics of social (dis)alignments in the digital context. I will then move on to discuss the research considerations, including the limitations of the study. The final section offers some avenues for further research and thus concludes Part I of the thesis.

7.1 Theoretical contributions

Research on the self in digital contexts has largely ignored relational accounts of the self as the primary perspective (see however Lagerkvist, 2016, on the ‘exister’). With this thesis I have demonstrated the benefits of the relational approach: it allows us to critically examine the multiple, fluctuating and conflicting relational forces in today’s Western societies that intersect at the site of the self, and the multifarious demands facing the contemporary self as a result of this. The relational perspective brings with it epistemological concerns about being online and, as I have stressed throughout the thesis, foregrounds the situated, contextual, social and constructed nature of the self, online and off, as well as the fluidity of the conditions under which the self is constructed and produced.

Furthermore, thinking in terms of relationality, we can better include digital materiality into accounts of the contemporary self. In this regard, I have discussed the contextualising capacity of digital artefacts and how these contribute to the construction of symbolic differences (in the sense of Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ as limited) and participate in this way in building communality and social alignment. Materia are also implicated in the access to and maintenance of imaginaries, not only as contextualising elements.

Furthermore, a relational approach to being online is not only a move away from the essentialist position still haunting studies on ‘online identity’, but also a move away from the individual at the centre in favour of relational processes that better captures the contemporary conditions shaping self-construction. The relational perspective has consequences for how we view the self: in the online context, the notion of the relational self makes binary distinctions between the ‘real’ and ‘fake’ online identities, or indeed the dualism of the modes online/offline, redundant; instead, the relational approach re-orient us to examine the richness and complexity of relations that shape the self, to include the current socio-cultural and the socio-economic contexts in the articulations of the self without forgetting relations of power (symbolic, economic, etc.) meeting at the site of the self. To that effect, we move away from privileging the digital context and may even question the whole notion of ‘online self’ insofar as this leads us to think in terms of online/offline dichotomy: in the relational view, no such distinction is necessary.

However, the relational view does not subject the individual to a position of helpless recipient of or unwitting subject to processual influences; it is important to bear in mind that processes are also resisted, negotiated, reappropriated, and subverted
Conclusions

(Gergen, 1994, 2009) and thus, individuals have relational agency. Similarly, as not all that flows in relations between and among participants is positive, but antagonistic, alienating, and even destructive relations exist, individuals are not powerless, but rather, these relations are discursively negotiated in interaction. The self is thus a construction of the moment (Gergen, 1991), inflicted by social saturation and the absorption of multiple voices. The self is a dialectical, social construct that becomes constructed in the context of a society similarly saturated by multiple voices (Ibid.). In the words of Castoriadis (1994: 332), “[s]ozialised individuals are walking and talking fragments of a given society”, indeed, ‘total fragments’ as “they embody, in part actually, in part potentially, the essential core of the institutions and the significations of their society”.

In addition, the thesis contributes to how we conceptualise the social imaginary by bringing into focus the semiotic dimension of imaginaries. Importantly, I have argued how imaginaries as systems of difference not only construct alliances and fields of shared aspiration, but that these fields of aspiration constitute constrained fields of possibility, and thus imaginaries can be seen as engaged in processes of othering: this is because imaginaries construct normative differences, and thus have the ability to be potentially alienating.

As systems of difference, however, where cultural meanings are relational and fluid, imaginaries are also subject to alteration by way of social convention. The social imaginary is frequently utilised as a conceptual tool for explaining belonging, yet, these theorisations tend to focus on positive outcomes of the social function of imaginaries, namely, on sense of belonging; however, imaginaries are also implicated in giving rise to antagonistic relations and negative relational flows that shape how the self is conceived of as the other, and constructed as excluded subject.

I have here tried to show how imaginaries thus offer identifications that lead to a sense of not belonging. It is important to critically engage with the concept of the imaginary and explore how the dominant symbolic is reproduced on various levels than span the cultural domain but also the individual. I have tried to do this with this thesis, as well as show that despite the tendencies of the imaginary to reproduce hegemonic practices of imagining, it also offers opportunities for counter-discourses and thereby allows the construction of new, alternative imaginaries that can be engaged with in a mode of relational affirmation.

Imagination as bridging consumption and emotion has to some extent been discussed in previous research (e.g. Illouz, 2009; Campbell, 1987) and I have included emotion, if not delved into it at length, in my discussions of affective alignment. The way emotions as ‘affective economies’ align subjects, and how various discourses (of hate, of love, of loyalty) are mobilised to bring into being the ‘imagined other’, is discussed by Ahmed (2004) in a very illuminating manner. This mechanism operates in the online realm as much as it does offline. Emotion is not a possession of a person and thus does not reside with a subject (Ahmed, 2004), but emerges in particular relational scenarios (Burkitt, 2014). These emotional scenarios, like all action and all meaning, are “relational in origin and performance” (Gergen,
Like selves are at no point individual, each “suspended in an array of precariously situated relationships” (Gergen, 1994: 209), emotion is the outcome of relational configuration. Participation in different kinds of relational traditions allows us to “recognize ourselves as having emotions [] that we navigate when, where, and how they can be performed” (Gergen, 2011a: 281).

Social media is rich in emotional variance and because the digital pathways construct ‘unlikely meeting points’, emotion-based conflict is also common. We see polarisation of opinion and hate speech that results from divergent worlds colliding. The semiotic spaces online are fragile and fluid, any given social context being permeated continually by competing forces. In addition to conceptualising the ‘self online’ as relational, this thesis offers a conceptualisation of social media as a relational resource that is continually evolving as it is constituted by the intersecting social realities of its users. Social media platforms as ‘techno-cultural constructs’ and ‘socioeconomic structures’ (van Dijck, 2013a: 28) influence the ways in which identity may or may not be expressed (e.g. van Dijck, 2013a, 2013b; Lovink, 2011). As van Dijck (2013a: 41) underlines, “the explanatory power of the model [resides] in the connections between the elements ”. Similarly, in the relational account of being, the explanatory potential lies in the relations constituting the self, including relations of power.

Online spaces are temporary social and cultural constructions that offer a snapshot to the current cultural values that come to existence by discursive construction in and through interaction. However, materiality, being intrinsically linked to the mobilisation of imaginaries, should not be sidelined. The contextualising capacity of digital artefacts serves to co-construct the imagined communities it invites, but is also involved in evoking affect. Artefacts thus shape the social spaces they create, rendering some users contextually congruent, others as incongruent. In the research articles, I have illustrated how social media has the potential to increase the relational repertoire of individual users, while this undoubtedly also exposes the user to conflictual relational voices.

Embedded in the notion of the relational self is the assumption that these relations are social. However, to move ‘beyond the social’, Gergen (1999a: 138) calls for an expansion of the concept of relation “to include the world of the non-social, and particularly, the natural environment”. Later on, Gergen (2011a, 2011b) reiterated this desire for conceptual expansion and noted the usefulness of including in “the account of the relational being [] what we commonly construct as the physical environment”. This thesis has tried to answer this call by exploring the self as the intersection of multitude of relations comprising not only relational processes among people, but also the relational flow between people, consumption and the market, the media and social media from technological, material and economic perspective. As such, it is an attempt to extend the scope of relationality and to include the current digital context without being limited to the merely technological aspects of it.

As we need to explore how the digital is changing our notion of the self, adopting a relational perspective offers a more holistic account of the complex social
and cultural forces that shape the articulations of the relational self in the digital age. In this way, the platform in all its materiality and relational potentiality is not granted too much importance per se, yet the dialogic potential of said technology is acknowledged. This potential, naturally, can be used for ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and similarly, existing as it does only in potential terms, coming into existence in configurations of relationships.

7.2 Methodological contributions

In the research field of digital media studies, but also in sociologically oriented research on consumption, discourse analytical approaches have become more popular, yet there is still a relative lack of linguistically oriented analyses of media texts (text understood in the wider sense) that would make use of finer grammatical micro-level analysis. Particularly, research applying CDA or systemic functional linguistics (SFL) on media texts is scarce (Graham, 2004), especially research that would integrate these methods with media theory. This study has shown that there is no reason not to engage in a method of analysis that is based on a more detailed grammatical analysis.

As remarked a few decades ago by Poynton (1993: 1-2), there is “a double irony in what has come to be termed the ‘linguistic turn’ in the social/human sciences being achieved largely outside disciplinary linguistic and what I will term the ‘social turn’ in linguistics having substantially ignored any kind of theorising of the social outside conservative [versions of sociology]”: while things have arguably moved forward, this thesis has aimed to benefit from both camps and integrate insights from linguistics and sociology alike. In particular, as in the relational framework the self is seen as a dynamic dialectic construct emergent in relations, and, notably, constructed in interaction, approaching interaction in digital spaces from a linguistic perspective coupled with social and cultural theory allows a more systematic inquiry.

Anthropological approaches are widely used in both media and Internet studies, if also in consumer studies. As Horst and Miller (2012: 108) write, “anthropology is one of the few disciplines equipped to immerse itself in the process by which digital culture becomes normative culture, and to understand what it tells us about being human”. While I agree about the suitability of anthropological inquiry, I have also demonstrated the usefulness of combining linguistic methods (not only discursive, but grammatical approaches, too) as complementary to anthropological methods such as (digital) ethnography.

This thesis is informed by, and employs in much of the analysis, the framework of Appraisal theory: based on SFL, it employs the conceptual apparatuses of SFL and approaches the study of language from a social perspective, as social action. The main tenets of the approach are consideration of the context of situation together with the three levels of meaning (ideational, interpersonal and textual) that together represent social reality, each illuminating a different aspect of meaning.
making. An elaboration of the interpersonal meaning making resources, Appraisal analysis offers conceptual tools for a more systematic and detailed analysis of social interaction. Linguistic methods do not always equal detailed micro-level analyses, although linguistic perspectives rooted in a more detailed grammatical description (for example, socially oriented theories of language, such as SFL) as well as multimodal (see e.g. Ventola, Charles & Kaltenbacher, 2004) and corpus-linguistic analysis (e.g. Sindoni, 2015, 2016) will arguably also be useful for analysing digital material when combined with social theory.

With this thesis I bring a more detailed linguistic analysis to the repertoire of methods of analysing digital content (meaning the wider reading of social interaction and the multsemiotic realisations of it), online sociality and modes of belonging as these are built upon social, cultural and ideological dis/alignments. This thesis thus shows that multidisciplinary, multimethod approach to digital culture can yield new insights on technology’s impact and role in contemporary society and how it reconfigures our social lives.

7.3 Practical implications

Any attempt to increase the understanding of complex social phenomena is always also a practical endeavour. However, concerns have been raised in the field of media and communication research as to the practical value and societal impact of media research (Tsatsou, 2016). In answering this call, the current thesis articulates the practical potential of social media use as ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott, 1985; however, see also Van der Graaf et al., 2016) where the rebellious acts are neither organised nor executed en masse, but rather, manifest in the everyday acts of silent non-participation in various regimes, or in the form of everyday tactics (de Certeau, 1984) that circumvent institutionalised or hegemonic ways of doing and being to express individualised action and personal will.

The plus-sized bloggers body acceptance project is an example of this, although in the realm of academia their identity project could be approached from multiple perspectives, including feminist critique likely to undermine any empowering potential of such collective activity. However, this does not mean co-action is not individually and locally meaningful, or that the positive effects of local social (media) action should be evaluated as meaningful or not from the outside. A similar point is made by fan practices that demonstrate the potential of social media spaces for various forms of enfranchisement, which can have a significant personal impact (for example, parent bereavement groups, see e.g. Hård Af Segerstad & Kasperowski, 2014).

Different social imaginaries are mobilised in different contexts. The contradictions present at the site of the self result from conflicting identifications emerging from intersecting relations, some of which we relate to in a mode of alignment, others by way of disalignment. Thus, relational being is fundamentally a fluctuating
process of various alignments and disalignments, with momentary discursive and relational achievements translating into temporary and situated congruence with others. Congruence, here, can be seen as an attempt to be in relationships where co-action is affirmative (Gergen, 2009): social media afford such contexts that allow and generate ideological and emotional homogeneity. Ideological differences, however, foster the creation of symbolic boundaries and divisions of in-groups and out-groups, of polarised thinking in terms of “us versus them”. Ideological disalignment among divergent groups erupts readily in digital contexts; hate speech being one example of this.

Social media enclaves as relational configurations tend to form around emotional coherence, partly due to homophily (Markham, 2012b) and discursively constructed affective alignment. Despite its public character, social media are for the most part very personal and ‘selfish’ media, that is, they are often used for personal ends and gains. It thus caters to self-oriented use resulting in relational congruence among similar others and affirmative interaction. Social media are media for talking about the self, sharing the self, constructing the self, although in a collective manner. Thus, even when other-oriented, social interaction online seeks to enforce relational congruence. Therefore, perhaps the democratising and empowering potential of social media are to be located at the level of the individual and in the realm of the everyday, rather than (only) approach the liberatory potential from a large-scale perspective of social action or political participation and engagement (however, the events of the Arab Spring showed social media can be utilised for such ends, too).

To think about social media in terms of the relational potential it offers, we see how social media has the capacity to enhance existing relationships but how it also provides opportunities to create new ones; therefore, the relational approach acknowledges the potential that lies therein, but also critically assesses the possible pitfalls. Social media is an interpersonal resource that provides opportunities for open dialogue concerning matters and issues that are personally meaningful. In this respect particularised enclaves may be beneficial for individuals (e.g. disenfranchised or marginalised individuals).

For the purposes of democratic participation and constructive discussion social media benefits from the introduction of more voices, although this at the same time tends to lead to escalation of oppositional emotional reaction; however, the contrarian interpersonal discourse, for example hate speech, is not a feature of the media, but of people, and thus, we as people brought together increasingly via media need to learn to co-exist and interact in a constructive fashion. A challenge, for sure, but we should also bear in mind that social media mediated sociality is, nevertheless, a recent development, and the communicative practices therein are likely to evolve.

Yet, social media do have the potential to increase the relational capacity for the purposes of co-action and the creation of ‘good’, as recent examples of counter-publics on social media have shown us. As an example, the series of YouTube videos ‘Every Second Counts’ that went viral in Europe early February 2017 as a humorous
retort to president Trump’s “America first” manifesto (which changed the way we imagine the inter-continental and international relations in that it did away with any notion of unison or co-operation, instead instilling the notion of hierarchy), each video representing a European country and why the country in question should be “second” in line. Ironically perhaps, the manoeuvre to place America first united EU citizens in a mediated manner in the spirit of rebellion via humour.

Thus, viewing social media as a relational resource allows us to view it in light of negotiation, contestation, and resistance of the relational input from forces surrounding us. Gergen (2009: xvi) emphasises how the ‘discourse of effects’, for example how media affects and shapes our being, is closely tied to the notion of a bounded being. Rather, as we are relational beings co-constituted in relations, we are not hapless victims of external powers that then shape us: even though the media has undisputed power over symbolic representation, there is always room for negotiation.

7.4 Research considerations

The present study is not without its limitations. For one, the material collected for the independent research articles is of limited size. As a qualitative study, however, large amount of empirical material is not necessary as the argumentation style is not statistical in nature, but analytical (Alasuutari, 1999). The research articles also represent a limited, somewhat privileged, section of the global population in terms of, for example, online access or presence (see Brabham, 2015) and other material and/or financial means or, indeed, purchasing power (Sassatelli, 2008), but also in terms of access to cultural and symbolic resources (e.g. Couldry, 2012).

Moreover, both fashion consumption (Article I) and high-end technology consumption (Articles II-IV) present a somewhat privileged consumer position and could thus be seen as what Veblen (1994 [1899]; see also Trigg, 2001) termed ‘conspicuous consumption’: to be able to consume certain products, lifestyles and symbolic meanings, one must have the means and access to do so. I acknowledge that the specific consumer positions examined in the articles are not accessible to everyone, but furthermore, they are not welcomed by everyone. Bauman (1999: 40) has expressed the conflicted nature of consumer subjectivity by pointing out the underlying inequalities that cast limitations on conceivable action:

"Everybody may be cast in to the mode of consumer; everybody may wish to be a consumer and indulge in the opportunities which that mode of life holds. But not everybody can be a consumer. Desire is not enough; to squeeze the pleasure out of desire, one must have a reasonable hope of obtaining the desired object, and while that hope is reasonable for some, it is futile for others. All of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers".
Similarly, since not everyone is in the position to engage in identity work in the first place, or to engage in the production or consumption of symbolic meanings (see also Lawler, 2014; Skeggs, 2004), ‘identity work’ in itself carries undertones of class (Chaffee, 2014: 108). Access to cultural resources is not equally distributed and this inequality carries over to the digital realm: furthermore, the issue of “digital divide” is not only a matter of economic means, but there are many “non-economic factors of social inequality – linked to skill and cultural capital” (Wellman, 2011: 21).

Thus, it is fair to say that the collectives explored in this thesis are in a privileged position (although not in all respects), which also reflects a crucial dimension of the commodified self: the ‘privileged’ status as a ‘Baumanian chooser’. However, from the perspective of aiming to gain deeper knowledge of how consumption and the values of contemporary consumer society steer, position, as well as limit individuals and their sense of self, the choice to investigate these collectives where consumption is intricately tied to self-expression is justified.

The study represents a Western bias, all research articles having been conducted in a Western context: as such they are portrayals of the Western value systems and way(s) of life. I thus recognise that the ‘selves on social media’ portrayed by these groups analysed in this study represent a certain segment of society and should not be taken to represent identity work on social media on any general terms. However, these studies exemplify the relational framework presented in this thesis and are not meant to be exhaustive representations of online sociality or modes of being online.

As cultural research is concerned with exploring social realities with the understanding that these, too, are socially and culturally constructed, the aim, therefore “is not to discover indisputable facts about a single social reality” (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006: 25), but to offer one perspective, one understanding of the social phenomena under investigation. It is thus acknowledged that the researcher’s account of such social realities is, likewise, a cultural construction, and this is the case in the present study, too. The aim of this study was to understand not only the practices that were examined and their role in constructing the social reality observed, for example, related to consumption and media, but also the conditions for their production, their embeddedness in the contemporary consumer culture, and the influence of market ideologies and media representations on our ways of imagining and of self-construction.

In social and cultural research, and in qualitative research generally, validity of research is a somewhat problematic notion, and cannot be guaranteed by appropriate use of method only (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006: 24). Likewise, in discursive research, according to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008: 240), it is not relevant to employ concepts that originate in the positivist research tradition, for example, the terms reliability and validity, or indeed that of replicability (e.g. Markham, 2006, 2017). However, an accurate and precise process report of how the research was carried out adds to validity by allowing a reviewer to assess the process as well as to assess whether the conclusions drawn on the basis of the material seem trustworthy. Therefore, the researcher is required to explain and describe how, in what
way, she has collected the material and how she arrived at the conclusions that she did (Alasuutari, 2001: 68). I have aimed to provide a thorough description of how the studies were carried out, including description of how the empirical material was collected and analysed.

When examining empirical material, theories serve to *widen* the scope of understanding of the empiria, rather than merely narrowing down the possible interpretations (Alasuutari, 2001: 72): theory thus constitutes a third position in addition to and alongside of the researcher and the informant/community, providing a perspective from where to make observations. Theory therefore allows different interpretations to be made (Alasuutari, 2001; Silverman, 2004). Indeed, it is common practice in cultural research to combine multiple methods and materials as well as various perspectives to better understand “the interplay between cultural discourses and everyday discursive practices in a particular setting” (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006: 25). Such an approach is seen as adding to the rigour and richness of the study (Ibid.): in the current thesis, I have drawn on multiple theoretical frameworks in an attempt to better understand the phenomena under examination.

Article I on plus-sized fashion blogging draws on diverse literature in order to account for the social and cultural phenomenon more comprehensibly. While the focus of analysis was plus-sized fashion blogs and the act of ‘fatoshion blogging’ as a subversive, transformative cultural practice utilised in self-construction, secondary material was consulted for a more nuanced understanding of the fatosphere generally, but also of fatoshion blogging as identity work specifically. Thus, Instagram and Twitter were consulted using specific hashtags, as often the fatoshion blogs themselves link to these other social media sites.

Similarly, in Articles II-IV, where Steve Jobs memorial video tribute and the related commentary was used as the primary empirical material, investigation in the form of netnography was carried out by exploring multiple sources of material that include various online sites (YouTube, Apple website memorial page, Twitter, newspaper and magazine stories of Jobs’ death, Apple fan sites), even though, in the end, only one memorial video was selected for further, more detailed analysis.

It is in line with ethnographic research tradition to observe various practices for a longer period of time. In addition to various social media sites, the material collected was subjected to various methods of analysis, that is, the initial content analysis (article II) and Appraisal analysis (article II-IV) as well as CDA (article III). These three articles (II – IV) that analyse the Steve Jobs memorial material all draw on a different body of literature, and thus set out to analyse the cultural practice from different perspectives. This approach is not only considered to add to the rigour, but also shows the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural practices such as fandom and underlines the fact that it is neither possible nor desirable to treat such cultural phenomena as instances of any one thing only, but to examine them from multiple perspectives for a richer account.

However, I understand that while I consider the interdisciplinary nature of this thesis to be one of its strengths, some may consider it a weakness: when attempt-
Conclusions

ing to provide a broader account of social phenomena, as I have here done, it is neither possible nor desirable to go into the finer details and elaborate on the smaller details extensively.

It is often claimed that ethnographic methods suffer from subjectivity, being thus less objective; however, according to Boellstorff et al., (2012: 41), subjectivity is “a vital part of ethnographic rigor, not only for how it offers us a position from which to engage and interpret, but because it forms the backbone of intersubjective understanding”. What’s more, no completely objective positioning is possible in science that would be free of all preconceptions, attitudes, biases and concerns: thus, science produces situated knowledge (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Furthermore, Boellstorff et al. (2012: 30-31) maintain that ethnographic methods are far from unscientific: instead of “testable hypotheses”, ethnographers focus on explaining and understanding culture and its many processes, relying on observation instead of prediction. This thesis, too, offers one understanding and one perspective on how we might think about the self being positioned at the intersection of consumption and digital media without claiming to be an exhaustive account on being online.

Furthermore, when engaging in ethnographic research, digital or otherwise, we should bear in mind that the “ethnographic gaze” inevitably contributes to the construction of the objects it sets out to examine; thus, we as researchers participate in the (re)construction of the surrounding social reality as well as in self-reflexive examination thereof (Alasuutari, 2001: 84). I acknowledge that my own position, my cultural, social, educational and economic background inevitably shapes my interpretation and, likewise, contributes to the construction of the object of the study but also to that of my findings. Reflexivity and self-assessment constitute a “means for critically inspecting the whole of the research process”, including interpretations made, and as such add to the validity of the accounts provided of the phenomena examined (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 32). Good epistemic practice (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006: 31) thus includes critical thinking not only relative to the object of research, but also one’s own researcher conduct.

Digital research context carries its own implications for research practice (e.g. Markham, 2004a, 2004b). All research is guided by research ethics, and while Internet research comes with a set of ethical guidelines of its own (see e.g. Buchanan, 2011, for an overview of Internet research ethics), these are embedded in research ethics designed for and guiding research more widely. The Association of Internet Research has published ethical guidelines, Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research, published in 2012 and authored, among others, by Markham and Buchanan, to help carry out research in digital environments.

There is also a relatively new online resource titled Network System Ethics published 2016 (under the Creative Commons licence) that offers guidelines for researchers from various disciplines engaged with Internet research regarding “the ethical and social impact of technical Internet research projects”, aimed at improving the ethical considerations researchers face with online material and
different stakeholders. As a medium, the Internet brings with it some specific ethical concerns, such as issues pertaining to the ethicalness regarding the use of public online data, privacy issues of online material in terms of digital objects, but also regarding users/online community members and participants as objects of study. Also, linked to this, anonymity, identity (as in name and other personal information) as well as overall security, especially when dealing with individuals in need of protection, or groups of diminished autonomy, are important issues to consider (Buchanan, 2011; Kozinets, 2010).

Moreover, in terms of using public online material, there are the questions of consent (for use and collection) and ownership of original material, and researchers should not assume that only because something is public, it is also freely available. In this study, the material collected for article I from plus-sized fashion blogs was carried out in such a manner that no identities were revealed (other than the one whose photo was used in the publication with her explicit permission). All user names and blog URLs were kept confidential; however, no consent was requested from the bloggers as fashion blogging is, and was considered to be in this study, such an endeavour that seeks publicity for the cause and aims for popularity. The topic of fashion blogging was not considered a sensitive topic in that not “fabricating” (Markham, 2012) the empirical material would endanger anyone. Thus, the authors conceded it was enough to anonymise the content in terms of bloggers’ names as well as the blog names. When it comes to quotes from the material presented in Article I, it is possible that these are recoverable online if searched, but as mentioned, fa(t)shion blogging was not deemed to constitute an activity that is of sensitive nature.

The material collected for articles II-IV comprises a memorial video, which is uploaded by an individual who seeks visibility as a music maker and perhaps also popularity; that is, he has featured in radio shows featuring the very YouTube memorial production analysed in this study, and this digital production has also been available for download on the music sharing platform iTunes. All the comments made for the video are by users under pseudonyms, and thus the author(s) do not have knowledge of the identities of the commentators. However, the comments were anonymised and user names removed from the material. Time stamps of the comments were also removed. The same issue pertains as in article I: when searched, it is possible that user comments presented as quotes in the articles are recoverable, but this was not considered to present a problem as the users the comments link to are pseudonyms, and not real names.

Relating to searchable content, Markham (2012) raises the issue of certain conservativeness “haunting” qualitative research that becomes particularly visible in digital contexts in conjunction with privacy issues as researchers deal with online material, and that is ‘reliable data’. She notes that in order to protect online informants, transfiguration of data may sometimes be needed, a practice that goes against what is traditionally deemed ‘reliable data’, i.e. material that has not been tampered with. As data is more and more searchable nowadays, anonymising data may not
be a sufficient means for protecting the privacy of research participants. Thus, what Markham (Ibid.) calls ‘fabrication’, a bricolage of data, might ensure ethical research process regarding protection of the research participants. Development in technologies, but also in research practices, have led to a situation where material collected and analysed in research projects are more easily recoverable together with the identities of informants: data mining, for one, but open access publishing, too, compromise anonymity of participants in new ways. Fabrication as a way of presenting data does not have to compromise data integrity (and, indeed, original data can be made available upon request elsewhere), but it nevertheless illustrates the need for new ways of carrying out research in digital contexts.

Privacy is an important consideration in doing research on the Internet; however, a certain difficulty exists in determining the meaning of privacy: privacy, for some, may have to do more with the use of data rather than the content itself (which may be public), and conversely, it may have to do with content and fears of misquotation, in which case citing verbatim may be the best option (Markham, 2012). The “ambiguity of the meaning of privacy, harm, or vulnerability requires researchers to make informed decisions about their practice on a case-by-case basis” (Markham, 2012: 337): information being publicly available is not the same thing as consent, and “[d]espite the fact that users recognize the overtly public nature of their presentation of self via digital media, this has no universally agreed upon or a priori correspondence with the harm that might eventually be felt” (Markham, 2012: 337). Indeed, when it comes to harm, it is stated in the *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research* (2012: 4, emphasis added) that “[b]ecause ‘harm’ is defined contextually, ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally”. In the current study the research contexts were carefully considered, and it was deemed no harm would be caused to individuals examined in the studies if and when quotes from the material collected online were used in publications in verbatim.

### 7.5 Avenues for further research

The various influences of media technology on the everyday life is likely to continue to be of interest to scholars. A more integrated view on the entanglement of humans and technology has been voiced recently in the context of digital art that considers humans as inseparable from the relationships they have with technologies they are engaged with (Taffel, 2016, on postdigital artworks). Entanglement implies a network of sorts, and some reject the self as being a part of any network, proposing instead that the self constitutes a network that can be viewed as a complex assemblage of objects, as subjectively experienced ‘network of identities’ (Banks, 2015, on the discourses surrounding technologies). While Banks (2015) underlines agency and the role of agents in the network, the relational view (Gergen, 2006, 2009) adopted in this thesis has focuses on the constitutive nature of the *relationships* on the individual more than any individual agent.
Entanglement however, offers new research directions particularly as the digital is likely to become more and more interwoven in our social existence. Further research might include investigations of materiality and emotion in constructing our lives, as briefly touched on in this thesis. The “material virtualities” in digital spaces (see e.g. Sundén, 2003) as well as explorations of the body and embodiment relative to digitality forms a growing interest. Thus, not only the material aspects of digital spaces, but also the emotional dimension calls for more research. How emotions function as relational resources, how emotions figure in accounts of the self online, or how other relational entities make us feel are all pertinent questions when we see social media as an emotionally infused social space.

There has been a call for including emotions in the sociology of consumption, too (Illouz, 2009). Consumption not only elicits emotions but is sustained by them, and as this study has shown, there is a complex interrelatedness between emotion, consumption and media. Thus, research expanding the relational framework might account for the construction of emotion in more detail as an integral part of social interaction as well as our everyday as it takes place in the digital realm, and this might help us navigate the stormy and precarious digital terrains (Lagerkvist, 2016). As emotions emerge as part of the relational scenario (Gergen, 2009), including investigations of emotion is essential in future research on digital media where affective flows are sources of alignment and disalignment, for good as much as for bad.

In terms of methodological choices, there has also been a recent call to include the visual in the analysis of social media (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), and this would be a particularly fruitful avenue regarding self-construction in digital spaces that increasingly display multimodal representations, and as digital media inherently foster multimodal expression, this is only likely to increase. As we all inhabit increasingly visual semiotic spaces (see Lemke, 2009, for multimodal genres), the increasing impact digital images have in shaping our lives (Were, 2013) warrants further inquiry, not least because this increased visuality also requires new media literacy skills.

Recently, discussion of various ‘post’ positions have sprung up, postdigital, post-truth, and of course, the posthuman (see, e.g. Whitehead, 2012; Barad, 2003). A posthumanist notion of performativity, for Barad (2003), “incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors [and] calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman,’ examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized”. Donna Haraway’s (2006 [1985] book ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ can be seen as an opus that “epitomizes this point” (Barad, 2003: 808).

The relational approach to being underlines not only the co-constitution of being at the intersection of various relations and technologies, but also the importance of co-action and how the direction of our global future will “depend on capacities for relational transformation” (Gergen, 2006: 121-122) and the negotiation of relational flows for a more democratic, tolerant and inclusive future for all. How to achieve this is perhaps the most pressing agenda for any future research.
References

Atik, D. & Firat, F. (2013). Fashion creation and diffusion: the institution of


Anu Harju


Livingstone, S. (2011). Internet, Children, and Youth. In M. Consalvo & C. Ess, (Eds.),
of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 56(3), 330-345. DOI:
10.1080/08838151.2012.705195
Litt, E. & Hargittai, E. (2016). The Imagined Audience on Social Network Sites. Social
Media + Society, 1-12. DOI: 10.1177/2056305116633482
Polity Press.
Media & Society 12(6), 947–963. DOI: 10.1177/1461444809352203
Sociology, 41 (2), 59-67. DOI: 10.1177/001139293041002008
(Eds.), Consumer Tribes (pp. 27-34). Oxford: Elsevier.
10.1177/1440783312467094
Retrieved 17th February, 2016, from: http://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/35689/6.3manoff.pdf?sequence=1
10.1177/2056305115622479


**Online sources**


