The 'Imagined Author': Contingent Selves in an Anonymous Life Writing Subreddit

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Abstract: In a small corner of Reddit, with just 4,000 followers, a subreddit called "life stories" demonstrates the rich possibilities of life writing beyond the strict purview of identity markers. When considering how little we know about those individuals who post, an interesting set of questions arise about identity, authenticity, and authorship. What is known begins and ends with the texts themselves, and thus an "imagined author" (Das and Pavlíèková) emerges. Using narratives-in-interaction research (De Fina and Georgakopoulou), we examined forty well-engaged posts within the "life stories" subreddit to track the negotiations of meaning and identity within the writings and their responses. What emerges is not different from other digital life writing—confessions, vignettes, and reminiscences—but the level of intimacy and intensity does appear to rise.

Keywords: Imagined author, small stories research, anonymous life writing, identity and erasure, Reddit, contingent identity, digital confession

Introduction

The instinct to tell one's story from behind a cloak of obscurity is ancient. However, the digital version of that cloak has changed the dynamic of anonymous and pseudonymous life writing. From instant interactivity to the collapsed context of time and space (Wesch) to the always precarious nature of anonymity when conducted in "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff), the complexities are enormous. Still, the instinct to share life narratives in anonymized digital spaces is one of the constants of the nascent Internet's history (e.g., FML, Texts from Last Night, If You Find This Mail). So, what is special about that form of life writing? This essay describes how we examined a small but regularly used subreddit called "Life Stories" to study that question. When considering how little we know about those individuals who post, an interesting set of questions arise about identity, authenticity, and authorship. What is known begins and ends with the texts themselves, and thus an "imagined author" (Das and Pavlíèková) emerges. Much like an imagined audience, the space for co-constructed narrative and character, thus identity, appears to be limitless. However, as these posts are augmented with affirmation, questions, reflections, and advice by a second set of authors whose identities are also submerged, the very nature of contingent identities becomes apparent for their malleability and vulnerability to interpretation. Using narratives-in-interaction research (Defina and Georgakopoulou), we set out to examine forty well-engaged posts within the Life Stories subreddit to track the negotiations of meaning and identity within the writings and their responses.

After describing the literature that shaped our questions and analysis of the site, we describe our sample of stories and interactions and draw conclusions about what is notable about sharing life narratives in a digital space that affords various obscurity levels for the individual sharing the story.

Identity and Erasure

Understanding the nature and meaning of digital identity is fraught work, both for researchers and users. For those sending messages of their lives, the context in which they insert themselves is collapsed, which "does not create a total void but a chaotic version of its once-ordered self" (Wesch 22). The affordances for shaping a self in digitality result in possibilities such as pure fiction or creating an idealized self or a more authentic and traceable existence. One way to make sense of this chaos is to think about a distinction N. Katherine Hayles made between inscription and incorporation of a digital being (246). While inscription exerts technological control over a self (from filters and photoshopping to deep fakes), incorporation attempts to leave the context of the embodied self intact.

Meanwhile, who receives the message, when, where, on what device becomes a tangle of cues and conditions for acceptance. Even beyond the profound complications of bots, deep fakes, and scammers, the challenges of understanding another human being's digital presence are significant. Much reception in digital spaces mirrors a parasocial experience (Giles), a one-way relatedness reflecting celebrity culture. The experience of copresence (Campos-Castillo and Hinton), on the other hand, both shape individual behavior and force message receivers to negotiate the personae of other digital beings (Barbour et al.). We might feel comfortable navigating all the cues of digital identity. However, the verifications for who is speaking, what is real, who is listening, and what has meaning are all tenuous.

In an ecosystem such as Reddit, anonymity relieves certain strains on the "face work" that Goffman defined for human interaction. Until there are real-world implications of the speech on such a platform (Humphrey), the identities of the individuals shrouded by avatars and pseudonyms are less significant than what they do and say within the platform. Here, the possibility of an "identity playground" emerges, as Kafai et al. explain it. "The adoption of 'face-work' in the context of avatar creation highlights the interplay between individual agency...and social structures, i.e., the constraints imposed by community expectations that impact the representation of oneself" (26). Identity play introduces new pressures, a phenomenon that did not begin with the Internet.

Using literary Latin texts from the Roman imperial period as contextual standpoints, Tom Geue contends that anonymity should not be viewed "as a paralyzing lack, but as a constitutive effect of the text, and enabling force fundamental with the way it works" (5). We are mainly adopting Geue's use of the term "anonymity," which is quite broad and includes authors who did not make a conscious effort to be anonymous. Geue's overarching message is that the force of anonymous authorship is double-edged. While anonymity can infer timeless universality, since all identifying contextual information has been stripped, the practice can also lead to erasure. On the other hand, Traister and Starner remind us that texts with no authorial information can teach us a lot about the expectations of readers and authors as consumers and composers of anonymous works, respectively.

The erasure of the author is not the only concern. Hlavach and Freivogel note that the "spontaneous, freewheeling nature of the internet" (28) gives individuals unhindered access and the opportunity to post on online platforms impulsively. They argue that by choosing the anonymity route, the anonymous poster is withholding a vital part of the truth: their identity, an important piece of information that can help readers fathom motivation and credibility. Phillips and Milner, on the other hand, make the point that this is not simply a choice but an affordance of digitally mediated spaces (88). Moreover, such systems create profound ambiguities, as the intentions of the messages (from extremism to satire) are left unknown. However, anonymity is not the safeguard many users assume it will be: "the same tools that allow you to construct your mask *just so* also allow others to take

your mask from you and do with it whatever they please" (96-97), which is to say that the playground is filled with multiple motivations, perspectives, desires, means and ends. This is exacerbated by what Zuboff has termed "surveillance capitalism," which "unilaterally claims human experience into free raw material for translation into behavioral data" (8). A pervasive, secretive, and relentless monitoring constantly pressures not only anonymous activity but all activity, and ultimately all digital privacy. Constructing a narrative of the self in such a space, much like the space of offline life, is not done in a bubble and does not release the offline author from all consequences. How narratives emerge still relies heavily on interaction.

Narratives–in–(Anonymous) Interaction

Understanding life narratives as both the producer and sustainer of experience (Bruner 708) and identity (McAdams) has had a long, if uneven, run. Whether we are *homo narrans*, Fisher argues, or not, the pervasive elements of narrative that Burke laid out nearly 80 years ago still capture our imaginations as we decode our lives and the lives of others. However, the strict adherence to canonical definitions of a story does not align easily with either everyday living or digital relationality. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou turned away from what they referred to as the "narrative cannon" in favor of "aspects of situated language use, employed by speakers/narrators to position a display of situated, contextualized identities" (378). Rather than a narrative structure defining a life story, those who engage with the storyteller do so. This "small stories" or narratives–in–interaction perspective allowed space for narrative research within the contingent, sometimes incoherent, and quotidian expressions of social media, which Georgakopoulou and many other researchers have extended over the past decade–plus. As Page helpfully explains, "Small stories are characterized by fluidity, plasticity, and open–endedness, usually occurring in the small moments of talk, rather than as distinct, fully–fledged units" (426).

Georgakopoulou has created categories for how such interactions take place in digital spaces. Her concept of "narrative stance taking," for instance, describes the inception point of a small story chosen by the user to signal the act of storytelling that will grow, change, and merge into other narratives by way of interaction from other users (23). This is not always a peaceful process, as DeFina and Georgakopoulou explain because narratives can be contested, "both in the portrayal of events and characters and in the interaction with co–participants in social encounters" (113), which can result from a shared experience or what Fisher calls the "truth qualities" of a story (349).

In addition, as Pappacharissi has pointed out, affect plays a critical role in digital narratives, in connecting and disconnecting through the expression of sentiment (311). The role of affect, then, is to create a strong condition for acceptance or rejection and thus to engage in the narrative being told. This engagement is essential, especially for those who narrate their lives in anonymity, often in the light of confession. It is the only way a storyteller is "seen."

Digital confession

While confession in digital spaces is not always anonymous, the feeling of distance between the confessing self and the public self allows certain confessions to emerge. Birnholtz et al. note that platforms that allow anonymous communication in terms of question-asking and confessions afford individuals the opportunity to explore their identity, discuss taboo topics, divulge details about themselves that they would rather have kept a secret, and ask questions that may lead to stigmatization if their identities were known. Furthermore, the authors make a distinction between stigma and taboo; they note that taboo is "an uncomfortable topic for discussion" while stigma "is something that reflects

on the person" (2615). Their study discovered that despite anonymous platforms being "hotbeds of negativity and cyberbullying," students did not refrain from asking questions that border on taboo and reveal their potentially stigmatized identities (2621). Also, the authors report that they saw very few instances of negativity in the way responders commented and responded to questions; they gave valuable comments and provided relevant responses to questions posed instead.

While comparing the anonymous site Whisper with the named platform Twitter, Correa et al. found stark differences. Not only were language choices different—Whisper users tend to use more "personal, social, and informal words" than Twitter users (72). The study also found that Whisper users "express more negative emotions related to sadness and anger, and they communicate more wants, needs, and wishes than tweets" (72). The veil of anonymity, then, creates a dynamic that is likely different for the producers of narratives. Nevertheless, a similar effect is at work for the audience.

Imagined Author

A good deal of social media research has focused on the "imagined audience" of those who produce. However, less work considers the "imagined author." This is germane to all posts on social media and beyond. "The increasing number of widely circulating user-generated texts raises the question of whether and how the source or the origin of those texts matters to their ultimate readers; and how does the notion of the author co-determine the process of interpretation?" (Pavlíèková 31–32). To better understand that question, Pavlíèková used a hermeneutical approach to gain insight into a reader's agency in meaning-making, which is significant but not broad enough. A dialogue between the reader and text ensues, and the text's signifiers for its author's identity are crucial elements of this interaction. Out of this concept, she developed the *imagined author*, "suggesting that the reader's interpretation of the text is co-determined by the reader's image of the author" (33).

Out of these determinations comes a culture of contingent identity, negotiated on both sides of the production-consumption dance, which is not binary on a platform like Reddit because the roles morph and flip throughout the interaction. The audience's interpretation can be just the beginning of a narrative-in-interaction, with affordances such as upvotes, downvotes, and comments. Audiences can become the primary author, stories, and ebb and flow in importance; votes can amplify or mute a story, all while another set of invisible audiences watches.

Research questions

Based on the literature above, we developed the following research questions:

Narrative Stance taking

· What narrative themes do emerge on the Life Stories subreddit?
· What role does affect play in the narratives, and are particular emotions dominant?
· Is there an element of open-endedness to the narratives, or do stories have finality to them?

Audience Engagement and Imagined Author Probing

· Is there a kind of common digital citizenship among users of the life stories subreddit; do users have high or low karma points?
· What elements of engagement emerge in audience responses to the narrative in trying to co-construct the imagined author?
· How do audiences use affect to match the narrative or demonstrate alliance, connection, and understanding?

Narratives–in–interaction

The narratives-in-interaction framework (DeFina and Georgakopoulou) guides this study. It thus seeks out both the act of narrative stance taking and the interactions that subsequently accrete the narratives shared in collective spaces, both offline and online. The purpose of this kind of research is to consider multiple contexts around stories that are often underrepresented (as they emerge in conversations, for instance), rather than simply focusing on the classical definition of storytelling: "It affords an intimate view of what is going on in the here-and-now of any narrative interaction firmly locating us in the flow of everyday lived experience" (382). As it applies to social media, that baseline does not change significantly. As Georgakopoulou argues:

> Small stories research, having developed tools for examining fragmented, transposable, and atypical stories, is well-placed to provide a sound methodological basis for exploring stories on social media, in particular for interrogating what is distinctive about them, but also how they draw on or depart from other forms and practices of storytelling (*Small Stories Research* 269).

What creates the broader context in small stories research on social media is the attention paid to the narratives themselves and the affordances that enable both the story's inception and the responses that grow the narrative. Georgakopoulou suggests three interrelated layers to understand narrative interactions with a social media realm: 1) ways of telling; 2) sites where the stories are told; 3) tellers, in the broad sense of interacting communicators (270).

In the case of our study, Reddit highly affects the *ways of telling*, the choices made by both the user who tells the life story and their responders. Reddit allows users to post brief or long stories and multiple paratexts, including an avatar, a username, links to take people to users' histories, up and downvotes, and comments. The culture of Reddit, especially with the emphasis on anonymity, also highly affects the tellers. This approach is not without complications, Georgakopolou admits, mainly because the interactions take place out of the "context" in which most human interaction has been accustomed before digital life.

A prime challenge is to explore how interaction evolves when multiple participants tune in at different time zones and with different degrees of familiarity with the original poster. These interactions can either be with friends with whom there are multiple conversations across media or with strangers and 'de-individuated' users whose offline, demographic identities cannot possibly be established (271).

Very few places reveal this challenge quite so well as Reddit. Therefore, it is crucial to consider the texts and paratexts as interactions on their own, rather than extrapolating their meaning for the offline users that the texts murkily imply. We used a purposive sample of forty posts across seven years. We chose the stories based on at least some engagement varying both large and small numbers of comments and upvotes, variety within the titles to ensure a broad set of story possibilities and ensure we were not examining the same author twice.

After building the sample, we analyzed the texts for the ways of telling (themes of the stories, interactions within the comments by users and authors, and the nature of the stories' closure—whether it was open-ended or not) the site of the stories (affordances such as upvote, downvote, the variety of avatars, the use of anonymity, and the tellers (contexts about the authors found within the stories, their avatars, the usernames, previous Reddit use, and in follow-up comments).

After analyzing the data separately, we discussed the findings to identify the confluences in our analysis and any disagreements. After discussing the findings, we created themes of what we agreed was the most pertinent phenomenon, guided by the research questions.

Cloak and confession on Reddit

We found the following themes emerge about anonymous life writing on a platform such as Reddit.

Identification

One of the first themes that emerged was how anonymous authors define themselves. Anonymous authors defined themselves by their age, sexuality, gender, level of education, social status, place of residence, position in the family, race, occupation, relationship status, how long they have been using Reddit, and rarely, their real names. At times authors stated their ages blatantly; some others did not. However, we figured out their age range by piecing together other contextual information from their stories, including when they graduated high school or college. For example, in one of our samples, the anonymous author first states that "… when I was in 3rd or 4th grade my parents decided to migrate to Texas" and states further as they proceed in the storytelling that "I just want to say this when we migrated to the USA back in 1999 or 2000s …" (Entreprenuer_Guy92). In this case, we could estimate their age range by drawing inferences from the year they were in 3rd or 4th grade.

Still, the authors themselves often drop more than one marker of identity in their stories. While opening their story, a user mentions that "I am 44 years old. I grew up in an abusive home, and I left an abusive husband in 2014" (LonelyEliza).

Besides, to lay sufficient contexts for their stories, some anonymous authors often divulge information about their family members – parents, grandparents, siblings. As one author mentioned, "My father was a Private in the British Army and was a Pioneer, he served 2 tours of Afghanistan. My mother was a stay at home mum and is truly amazing" (itsmello1984).

Intimate revelations

The most prominent themes on the life stories subreddit are family, assault, abuse, suicide, relationships, pain, abandonment, hurt, sex, loss, parenthood, and depression. These are generally the themes that gain the most engagement, including upvotes and comments. Authors in the life stories subreddit exploit the cover of anonymity to express their deepest fears, confess their atrocities, ask uncomfortable questions, or reflect on their troubled past or present life situations, as the example narrative below shows:

> When I was in Jr high, I had sex with my teacher. I redid the 8th grade 3 times due to attendance and "behavioral issues".
> I just simply didn't want to be there. So because of those issues, the school put me on a special set of classes. I didn't switch classes like everyone else. My classmates and I stayed in one class with the same teacher all day. The only exception was lunch. We had 1 hour lunches with the rest of the kids on that lunch schedule. Now, because I redid the same grade 3 times, (2 of those school years I spent with the same teacher) we became close. He really inspired me to try and do the work. He taught me that an education is everything in this world. Ignorance doesn't get you anywhere (Conscious-Garbage-19).

In addition, many of the themes mentioned above coexist within stories. It was typical for themes of parenthood and abuse/assault, suicide, depression and pain, hurt and abandonment, to appear in the same context:

> And this pandemic situation happened and these monsters became more violent. They started fighting every fucking day, morning evening night everyday. I have heard so many violent bad words that no one could tolerate.
> And then I was literally fed up I yelled and had to physically fight them. Me being the quietest and the most decent kid in the whole vicinity had to raise my hand on my own

parents. This is like the utmost disgrace in an indian community. Me being the nicest guy did this sin which I can't remove this from my life forever.
And 2020 I was unemployed again. I did internship using my android mobile because I had no computer/laptop.
These monstrous parents and those events still haunt me to the date I can't tolerate this life (Kindly-Contract6223).

The ability to expose these realities at greater depth draws greater engagement and connects to more intense emotions that accompany these intimate tales.

Affect

Certain emotions are dominant in the subreddit narratives. A thematic analysis of the data shows that anger, sadness, hurt, shame, confusion, despair, and fear - emotions that are rightly consistent with the themes that pervade the narratives as discussed above – feature prominently in the narratives. The anonymous authors use affect to establish basal connections with their intended audience and seek empathy. In the story example above, the author cautions readers not to judge them harshly because "until you've experienced something similar, you'd never be able to relate to it or truly empathize with it" (Conscious-Garbage-19). As this example shows, the author appeals to readers' emotions to gain understanding and empathy, though more for the teacher than for themselves.

To appeal to readers' emotions for the story they are about to narrate, another author, before diving into the details of their story, states that:

It's scary how similar other people's depressive thoughts are compared to mine in "r/depression" area in Reddit. Some of these posts can demonstrate [sic] *literally* word for word what I've written down in my negative-thoughts journal (we all have one, admit it), and it just makes me feel kinda of small. If this feeling of depression and utter useless is pretty common, then well frick, I'm not helping anyone by thinking or behaving the way I do (Raptlackey_071).

By drawing parallels between their story, other authors' stories, and their audiences' life stories, this author leverages the traditional rhetoric concept of pathos to evoke sadness and sympathy in their readers.

Open-endedness vs. finality

In general terms, it seems those who identify as older tell stories about specific situations in their past and confessions that have a tone of finality. Older anonymous authors seldom tell stories about what is happening to them at the moment to pose questions, seek validation, or solicit advice as a snippet below from the life story of a 50+ person from our sample shows:

I'll tell anyone that she is most likely the reason I am here today, and defiantly the reason I became the man I am. I have no doubt that without her coming into my life, I would have either been dead or locked up long before now. While it can be easy to find someone to die for; I can honestly say that I have someone I live for (Viking_Tactical).

However, the stories of younger authors fall under two categories: Stories about things that have happened in their past and stories about pressing concerns they are dealing with currently. While stories about past issues and confessions told by some young anonymous authors close with a final tone like those told by older authors, young anonymous authors telling stories about current matters close their stories in an inconclusive manner. They either ask questions, seek advice, or exude a sense of ambivalence:

Since I do know from the start of the relationship that she certainly is ready for it. She said she is and that she doesn't want to wait any longer. Luckily I really had to go, for a good

reason. We want to meet each other tomorrow. I am helpless I feel under pressure. I don't know what I can say to her. I don't know how I can tell her, that I don't have any sexual interests at all. Just telling her the truth might make her feel that I am forced to be with her. But shall I always live with a lie? Does anybody out here have any kind of help for me? I am really sorry for the way to long text.

TL;DR How can I say to my not asexual gf, that I don't have sexual interests?
PS: Every kind of idea or maybe some experience would be really helpful. I really really love this girl. And I don't like it to lie to her (AmI_Right).

Another author who notes that they are "a teen" as they begin the process of telling their story concludes in a similar manner:

But I'm afraid I'm going to turn out like my mom because I'm already been going through men that are like my dad. All my friends tell me that I will be ok and I will make my life better. They say I can make my life whatever I want it to be and I can be so much better than her.......Can I really? (AngelRoseheart).

We deduce first from this analysis that older anonymous authors are unlikely to narrate things that are happening to them at the moment, seek advice, or ask questions; instead, they tell stories about past issues and confess to previous transgressions. On the other hand, we categorize young anonymous authors into two; those who confess transgressions, like older authors, and tell readers about past issues, and those who talk about things happening to them at the moment to seek advice and validation or solicit help.

Co-construction and acceptance

We categorized the elements of engagement that we see emerge into two: vertical and horizontal questions. Vertical questions are those comments/questions that circle back to the author; they are story-driving and author probing questions posed by readers directly to authors with the intent of gaining more context about the story they have just read.

After reading a story, for example, a reader with the username V8_BLENDER asks the author a story probing question, "Hey man. This story for real?" to which the author replies, "It unfortunately is. My life has been one train wreck after another with no breaks" (JohnFett117).

On the other hand, typical author probing questions emerge in comments to the user Additional_Ad_8440's story. User justmovingmytoes asks, "bro u got it, you've been through so much i can tell u are a tough man! u gna make it, I just know that. btw what do u do for living?" to gain more context about Additional_Ad_8440's life and narrative. Another reader, frank0peters, comments and asks:

Which state are you in currently? Because the first thing I was say is that you should try to get some financial stability. I know it's easier said than done. Get on food stamp if possible. If you don't even have a permanent address to live then go to a Church and ask for help. Tell them you are willing to do any type of work. If if they say no, be polite and build connection. You never know who might help. Also if the state have Medicaid, apply for that as well. Since sooner or later you might need some medical attention if you do physical labor. Go to the local library if you need to access the computer.
BTW how old are you now?

The author circles back by responding, "I build cabinets for the time being and install them into people's houses and stuff I used to do landscaping and pipeline work" and "Nah I work and everything I'm in oregon now I'm 23 though" to both questions respectively.

However, with horizontal questions/comments, readers take the core story and apply it to themselves or spring up conversations/debates about the story among themselves. The example below typifies how readers re-narrate the teller's story by applying it to themselves:

I'm coming up on 40 myself and feel like I don't have anything to show for it. I battle depression DAILY. Until this week I hadn't left my house in over 6 months. I get horrible anxiety at the thought of it. You aren't alone. I'm right here with you. Our issues may be different but we're very alike. I'm also female and feel like I have to start my life over, however I don't have the courage to. You're doing better in that respect. Instead of becoming a functioning part of society I'd rather crawl under a rock indefinitely. I'm working on it but the work is hard (flowers_followed).

While debating the truth value of a story, a reader responds to the author thus:

"The mental image of your wife under your arm kicking and screaming (whilst you're rolling your eyes and apologising for the fuss to bystanders – dunno if that happened or not, but it'd be funny if it did) just brought one hell of a smile to my face. Thank you for sharing this pal <3" (caraar12345).

In the same vein, another reader responds to a story by commenting, "Your own fault for allowing your yearbook to be collected" (dominant_driver) to spring up another conversation about the story and push it beyond its current state.

Nonjudgement, connection, and space

Beyond ascertaining the veracity of a story, the comment sections predominantly lean toward expressions of camaraderie, connection, and understanding rather than judgment. Audiences ask further questions based on the stories that authors share. They express empathy by speaking positive words of encouragement, providing advice, and extending the stories by telling their own stories to match the affect emanating from shared stories in the life stories subreddit, which often looks like acts of narrative solidarity.

To comfort an author, one reader comments, "*hug* Keep holding onto hope. You've survived so much so far, don't let this girl get you down too much. It seems like a very silly thing for her to stop talking to you because you were anxious about losing her friendship" (QuirkyMagpie).

Advising an author who solicits, another reader replies, "No, he should respect your feelings. Your thoughts are rational. Young boys mistake niceness for flirting when they're hopeful" (PointlessGrandma) to comfort and advise the author.

The commenters take cues from authors as well. In the case of the student who confesses sleeping with their teacher, a strong cue of accepting the teacher's actions reflects in the responses. Commenters did not make judgmental comments, and the author is praised mainly for the openness of the story.

Another theme we found was a lack of identity-probing. While there are examples of asking questions about identity, it almost always serves the story's context. Such acts seem to uphold the ethic of the subreddit, and perhaps the platform as a whole, to allow for optimal anonymity in the service of honest tellings.

Contingent texts in action and identity

Despite the complexities mentioned in the article's opening and the opportunity for freewheeling chaos that comes with anonymity, what we discovered in the Life Stories subreddit was more intimacy and confession than reticence or hyperbole. It appeared that need and care were more prevalent than image-bolstering or moralizing condemnation. This gives the contingency of identities a different shape than we expected.

Still, what gets read and what does not, how the engagement affects the narrative, and the narrator's place is all vulnerable to interaction or non-interaction. Anonymous authors on the subreddit take advantage of the culture that has emerged to share stories that could lead to stigmatization and to ask uncomfortable questions. Confessions and taboo stories

like this, if shared on named platforms, could lead to arrests and shaming, as well as the more positive instincts we found here. The cloak of anonymity on the Reddit platform makes anonymous authors comfortable sharing these stories with little or no fear of the more negative reprisals.

This broader realm of acceptance gives the story new meanings. Acceptance reorders or reaffirms normative moral values, depending on the story. Confession appears to present vulnerabilities that, once engaged, are shared, and sometimes ameliorated. All of this led us to believe that we were observing a classic example of Berlant's "intimate publics," strangers who develop intimacies through the sharing of texts, which is fueled mainly by affect, as Papacharissi suggests. However, this is not to argue that no norms existed. It was rare to find highly engaging stories in which storytellers portrayed themselves as perpetrators harming others, especially those with less power. Given that, it is possible to assume that storytellers established standards of acceptance over time.

Commenters play an influential role in developing the story's meaning, often shaping the narrator's identity as well, but by their actions and speech rather than their external, recognizable traits. From the perspective of a "second" audience—those reading without engaging—the commenters often become just as essential authors in the narrative. So perhaps we might extend Pavlíčková's concept of "imagined authors" to the texts themselves—the actions, the images, the meanings, and even the interactions. The texts create a "face," the context, and the relational elements that lead to an intimate public. The imagined authors may be the inception of one element of the textual body, but, taken together, no storytelling agent stands alone, and no more details about the external person are necessary for the story to hold meaning. Once engaged, no one agent could promise a definitive conclusion to the texts, even those who told closed-ended stories. The possibility of augmentation always awaits. So, the verifiability of the story is not germane—we can see the story emerge before us. Moreover, stripping these stories of the authors' and other characters' names removes nothing from understanding those stories. We realize that names and contingent identities accompanying them give way to a contingency of experience as the core identifier.

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