

Vol 7, n 1, 2019

Clinical Psychology

Narratives of Self-harm: the experience of young women through the qualitative analysis of blogs

Anna Gargiulo ^{1*}, Giorgia Margherita ¹

Abstract

In the last few years, an increasing number of studies have investigated the Self-harming behaviours, particularly widespread among young women, and the development of websites relating to Self-harm, in which the users are most often females. From a psychodynamic perspective, this article aims at identifying the most prevalent topics shared in blogs written by young people who Self-harm, in order to understand their experiences of suffering. We performed a thematic analysis of 70 Italian blogs relating to Self-harming behaviours. From our analysis all the blogs were declined in the feminine. Four thematic clusters were found: *troubled relationships with the Other; the hidden Self; loneliness, hate and guilt; the melancholic emotions; the Self-harming act*. Some specific functions of Self-harm blogs emerged: they can be a mean for self-disclosure and for emotion regulation. They are also spaces where young women meet to share their pain and offer and find support. Clinical implications for blogs as a place for illness narratives will be discussed.

¹ Department of Humanistic Studies, University of Naples Federico II
Email corresponding author: anna.gargiulo2@unina.it



Keywords:

Self-harming behaviour, Blog, Narrative, Psychodynamic perspective, Qualitative research

DOI: 10.6092/2282-1619/2019.7.2055

1. Introduction

Self-harming behaviour is now a phenomenon that is particularly widespread among adolescents and young people (Brown & Plener, 2017; Cipriano, Cella & Cotrufo, 2017; Lewis & Heath, 2015); and one that has become a social emergency leading to numerous scientific studies. We refer to the deliberate, and not socially sanctioned, self-destruction of one's own body tissue without suicidal intent, which includes behaviours like cutting, burning and scratching; elsewhere it has also been defined as non-suicidal self-injury (Gargiulo et al., 2014). The majority of the literature has focused on its psychic functions (Klonsky, 2007), including emotion regulation, self-punishment and peer bonding (Klonsky & Glenn, 2008).

As regards gender-related issues, current studies suggest that it is possible to determine the prevalence of this behaviour among women (Bresin & Schoenleber, 2015; Valencia-Agundo, Corbet Burcher, Ezpeleta, & Kramer, 2018). However, a part of the literature suggests that the

gender gap is not evident (Klonsky, 2011; Sorberger, Heath, Toste, & McLouth, 2012). Amongst the gender differences identified (Sornberger et al., 2012; Andover, Primack, Gibb, & Pepper, 2010; Gargiulo & Margherita, 2014; Whitlock et al., 2011) significant variation in routines and practices was highlighted, finding that males are more likely than females to Self-harm in a group or in the presence of peers. Other studies reported gender-related variations in function, showing that girls were more likely to self-damage as a form of self-punishment (Claes, Vandereycken, & Vertommen, 2007; Andover, et al., 2007). In conclusion, the literature demonstrated that there might be some differentiation in aetiology, trajectories and contexts according to gender (Whitlock & Rodham, 2013).

Nowadays, we observe that the phenomenon has spread into the virtual environment through the presence of websites about Self-harming behaviours (Lewis & Baker, 2013). The literature has mainly analysed the contents of these websites and their harmful and helpful aspects (Lewis & Seko, 2016). In line with previous studies on the narration of illness through the virtual environment (Margherita & Gargiulo, 2018; Martino, Gargiulo, Lemmo & Margherita, 2019; Margherita & Gargiulo, 2014), we consider Self-harm blogs as a network of people who share personal experiences about their Self-harming behaviours within a common virtual space. A blog constitutes one of the different and possible forms of Self expression in the virtual space, and it has specific narrative and psychic functions (Margherita & Gargiulo, 2018). If Self-harm has been interpreted as a concrete and pre-symbolic means of communication (Farber, Jackson, Tabin, & Bachar, 2007; Motz, 2001; Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002), allowing subjects to express the conflicts and feelings which can be hard to represent, from our point of view, the online Self-harm narratives may become a way to express emotions which would otherwise be directed to the body through the Self-harming act (Davis & Lewis, 2018). In this sense, our study proposes an analysis of the narratives of Self-harming behaviours in the virtual context to identify the common meanings constructed, reflecting on the psychic functions that the narration of Self-harm online might assume.

1.1 Self-harming behaviours in the virtual environment

Every virtual environment presents various psychic methods to make sense of the experience of the Self and of the Other (van Doorn, van Zoonen, & Wyatt, 2007). In particular, the literature showed how the cyberspace allows girls to express the discomfort and the vulnerability of the individual and of the whole female community (Sternudd, 2016).

Furthermore, while some similarities exist in the way girls and boys use social media, female online practices are characterized by specificities (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015).

Among the new languages and new forms of relationships, we focus on e-communities in which a sense of collective builds up through the Self-harming behaviour itself, so through common experiences of suffering and wounded bodies.

The websites about non-suicidal Self-injury are good examples. They are virtual environments where users share their experience of Self-harming behaviours through texts and images of body wounds.

There, the most active users are adolescents and young adults (Oksanen et al., 2016; Mars et al., 2015), in particular young women (Dyson et al., 2016; Lewis & Baker, 2011; Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006). Although we are aware of the existence of the stereotypical female cutting, a 'myth' which a part of feminist literature tries to criticize (Millard, 2013), the virtual context shows us wounded female bodies and narratives of Self-harm that permeate the collective imagination and which cannot be ignored.

The online content, concerning Self-harming behaviours, has been categorised into different types: websites that provide information including medical and psychology literature, and professional services; a few pro-Self-harm websites that contain triggering content, encouraging the idea of non-suicidal Self-injury as a voluntary and adaptive life-style choice; informal support Self-help websites (Boyd, Ryan, & Leavitt, 2011).

According to recent studies, online activity relating to Self-harm is a 'double-edge sword', highlighting a list of risks, which are stigmatisation, triggering, reinforcing and maintenance of the behaviour (Mitchell, Wells, Priebe, & Ybarra, 2014), and benefits, like mitigation of social isolation, recovery encouragement, emotional self-disclosure and curbing Self-destructive urges (Lewis & Seko, 2016).

Communicating about Self-harm could be associated, in part, with a reduction in behaviour frequency (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2014). Furthermore, the users agreed on the importance of anonymity, which made them feel less judged when talking about Self-harm online, and declared how much easier it is to talk with strangers, rather than friends or family members (Jones et al., 2011).

In particular, the virtual peer group has been shown to act as a source of support (Johnson, Zastawny, & Kulpa, 2010), thus, websites of Self-harming behaviour respond to different needs, like the desire to feel part of a supportive and understanding group, and to feel less lonely or isolated (Seko, Kidd, Wiljer, & McKenzie, 2015; Sutherland, Breen, & Lewis, 2013; Whitlock, Ladder, & Conterio, 2007).

1.2 The narrative function of blog

Although different types of websites exist, we focused on blogs, which are public websites that allow for the sharing of the experience through texts, images and videos in the form of an online diary. In this way, the blogger can narrate day by day, in a diachronic story of events, and the reader can follow the evolution of their path. Furthermore, the possible choice of anonymity allows for expression of an experience that is vividly recounted to an imaginary reader.

In general, according to Pennebaker and Seagal (1999), the narrative has healthy benefits, and the writing serves the function of organizing complex emotional experiences. In particular, blogging serves a cathartic or auto-therapeutic function, and allows to reflect mainly upon themselves and negative emotions (Gill, Newson & Oberlander, 2009). The blog is a privileged space of observation of the narration of the Self (Meritxell & Lopez-Garcia, 2017), allowing for the construction, the expression and the representation of the identity.

As regards gender variables, many studies showed how blog narratives vary according to gender. In particular, the style and content of the writing vary between male and female bloggers, and the latter tend to share more personal experiences compared to males (Schler, Koppel, Argamon, & Pennebaker, 2006; Argamon, Koppel, Pennebaker, & Schler, 2007).

The blog is a personal diary which is socialized into a network, a community. Virtual narratives mediate between the individual and the outside world, and enable the narrators to use new codes of communication to present themselves to the community.

In this sense, the self-narration could become a group-experience through the narration in the online environment. From our perspective, the individual identity shared on the web could also represent aspects of a whole e-community, the shared meanings regarding social identity that are produced within the group dynamic transcend the subjective experience (Margherita & Gargiulo, 2018).

In conclusion, the blog is a kind of website which can generate a sense of belonging, emotional support and social integration (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2010).

The present study aims at identifying the prevalent contents emerging from the blogs of Self-harming behaviours written by young people who Self-harm, in order to understand their experiences of suffering.

In particular, we focus on Italian blogs of Self-harm, to reflect on the Italian cultural context, which has not been investigated yet by other studies.

2. Materials and Methods

We take a psychodynamic perspective, cultural and semiotic (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007; Salvatore & Freda, 2011), that explores the narrative construction of Self-experience: a continuous process mediated by semiotic devices (meanings, linguistic canons, acts) and unconscious dynamics (Margherita, Troisi, Tessitore & Gargiulo, 2017). We believe that narratives provide access to culturally shared meanings (Bruner, 1991), and are the device of choice for fields of knowledge and transformation (Corrao, 1985). We chose a qualitative approach that aimed to understand cultural meanings using the device of narrative; this approach enabled us to explore collective meanings emerging from the individual narratives, assuming that a narrative is always a product co-constructed within a relationship with the other and with the context (Margherita, Gargiulo & Martino, 2015; Margherita, Boursier, Gargiulo & Nicolò, 2017; Martino et al., 2019).

The most suitable websites were selected via Internet search engines, searching for terms such as 'self injury behaviour', 'self cutting', 'self harm'. We chose terms that best represented the phenomena in everyday, young people's language, and excluded the kind of terminology that would have sent us to nosographic categories (like 'non-suicidal self-injury').

Our inclusion criteria were: public blogs which predominantly contained Self-harm contents; blogs containing narratives about Self-harming behaviours written by adolescents and young adults; blogs still active; blogs written in Italian. We excluded restricted access websites, private profiles on social networks, newsgroup and thematic chat rooms on social networks, medical reference sites, video links.

We identified 150 websites, but we monitored and analysed 70 Italian blogs relating to Self-harming behaviours because only those met our inclusion criteria. Because contributions often remain anonymous, we have no information on age or sex of the website authors, although, from the images and texts, we sense that the users are young. From our data collection it emerged that all blog texts were written and declined in the feminine (in Italian, the words like names and adjectives were all feminine declension). No blogs with masculine images or with masculine declension were found.

All blog owners were informed about the purpose of the study. The owners were invited to voice any objections to inclusion of their publicly posted data in the study in a de-identified form and were informed that if no objections were received, their public content would be analysed for research purposes. The individuals' anonymity was preserved hiding the users' names and the title of the blogs. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Naples Federico II, and the ethical implications of the study were carefully

compared and aligned to *the ethical guidelines for Internet mediated research* (British Psychological Society, 2013).

2.1 Data Analysis

To analyse the textual corpus, we used a qualitative-quantitative software for automatic analysis of text, called T-Lab (Lancia, 2004; 2008; <https://www.tlab.it>). Based on a comparison of different lexical profiles, T-Lab identifies dimensions of meanings, shared themes or issues present in the text under analysis, through the study of vocabulary (Bolasco, 1999). The software analyses the texts as a single set of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) and identifies the choice of lexis, looks at co-occurrence and runs a comparative analysis. T-Lab allows for observation of contextual fields of shared meanings using words as the starting point.

We grouped the blog narratives together as one corpus of text. First of all, we carried out a preliminary treatment of the text using the software tool (Table 1) to clean the corpus and prepare it for analysis.

Table 1. Preliminary organization of the text corpus.

Lemmatization	verb forms are converted to a present infinitive form, nouns and adjectives to their masculine, singular form, articulated prepositions to their article-less form.
Disambiguous	an operation whereby ambiguous semantic cases are solved. In particular those cases which deal with homographs, words that are spelled the same but have different meanings.
Lexicalization	converting the unit into a string phrase consisting of two or three words that refer to a unitary meaning.
Cleaning the vocabulary	words that are empty or insignificant, like abbreviations, proper names, articles and conjunctions are deleted.

To achieve our aim, we performed a thematic analysis of elementary context units (e.c.u. are small chunks of text, phrases, sentences or paragraphs, characterized by the same patterns of keywords). This analysis, which is based on a statistical study of the co-occurrence of words in the same e.c.u., leads to the emergence of significant thematic groups, which are called clusters. The final product summarises shared concerns in a few significant thematic clusters, as a contextual field of meanings shared by participants (Reinert, 1995).

Each cluster, which groups the lemmas that co-occur in the same elementary contexts, is described through lexical units (lemmas or keywords) and can be considered as contextual fields of meanings. This allows us to reflect and to interpret on the meaning of individual words by reference to a number of e.c.u. analysing them in the context in which they are used. Therefore,

the meaning of a word is known only through its relationship with the context, that is, through its distribution within a portion of text (Rastier et al., 2002). Furthermore, each cluster is characterized by maximum internal homogeneity and maximum heterogeneity between the other clusters. To interpret each theme that emerged from the statistical results, we gave each cluster a label.

The text under analysis had 636082 occurrences (how many times a word appears in the corpus), 20546 elementary contexts, 12423 lemmas (the label used for grouping the words).

3. Results

The first finding regards the fact that all the blogs represent a shared symbolic feminine space, because there are images of wounded female bodies and the texts are in the feminine declension; in fact, since the Italian language has gender, it is possible to see that certain words, like nouns and adjectives, are written in the feminine.

From our analysis of narratives four main thematic clusters emerged. We illustrate them using an ascending hierarchical classification, starting with those that are statistically significant (threshold level $p = .05$). We labelled each cluster and for each one we noted, in decreasing order, the most significant lemmas based on the χ^2 values (Table 2).

Table 2. Results of clusters analysis

Cluster	Main lemmas and their respective χ^2 value
<i>1 - Troubled relationships with the Other</i>	You (1850.598), I (942.754), love (582.941), to think (364.369), to understand (342.781), person (312.557), to feel (214.705), we (165.731), to switch (163.384), life (157.701), to change (146.726), to forget (137.548), times (131.114), moment (131.104), to turn (126.272), fuck (116.432), to choose (113.364), to find (111.652), to look for (103.157), to write (88.101), before (83.074), to wait (79.567), day (30.538), month (29.818), male (8.326).
<i>2 - The hidden Self</i>	Girl (1674.888), to smile (1482.524), to watch (1241.398), eye (1164.983), beautiful (1072.807), to see (1010.264), to cry (666.238), school (336.152), to laugh (227.72), mirror (224.834), hair (205.084), hand (186.403), to pretend (157.884), to close (151.356), to take (150.487), place (147.43),

	home (140.42), to hide (135.242), look (104.595), professor (98.403), mom (92.683).
--	---

3 - <i>Loneliness, hate and guilt: the melancholic emotions</i>	Fear (1867.473), to leave (1595.545), to lose (1010.076), alone (889.415), heart (749.273), to live (590.316), hate (400.049), hurt (399.573), to fall (381.865), new (334.144), weary (207.14), street (187.918), pain (169.994), to clap (104.529), friend (103.261), piece (98.596), truth (91.376), escape (67.32), guilt (44.339), to suffer (43.797), to kill (40.069), self-harm (35.046).
---	---

4 - <i>The Self-harming act</i>	She (4038.074), to eat (1730.271), blood (810.617), cuts (684.236), wrist (642.701), to lose weight (590.373), arm (452.414), to start (362.862), years (352.883), tear (289.062), water (270.999), slim (255.483), question (250.742), thigh (243.049), bathroom (228.415), bath tub (152.435), leg (149.465), fat (100.925), belly (80.419), body (71.555), cal (70.437), kilos (63.394), scar (51.478), skin (45.145), scratches (41.177), knife (37.006).
---------------------------------	---

The first and main cluster, called *Troubled relationships with the Other* (7556 e.c.u. out of a total of 20546, which equals 36.78%) includes many terms which refer to a relational dimension (*you, I, we*). In particular, this thematic cluster seems to focus on the experience of *love* affairs, characterised by desires that are difficult to achieve, as well as the phantom of possible abandonments, as is pointed out in the selected extracts.

‘A bug that says don't go away, I need you. I need a bug that breaks my ribs... that says don't go away, some words destroy you and then I destroy myself with all that I can find’.

‘I would have never been enough for you; I would not have been worth it. Then there was her and you would have never chosen me. I'm never the choice of anyone. You would have never loved me as I love you, even if you tried’.

Themes linked to experiences of abandonment and dynamics of dependence on partners are frequent. We observe the presence-absence of an Other, sometimes a *male*, who does not choose the girl, who abandons her, or does not consider her *enough*. A dependent relationship emerges in which the senses are invoked, even in their most violent aspects, as a test of love, “*a bug that breaks my ribs*”. In this cluster, it seems that relationships are put to the test through provocative acts aimed at testing the resistance of the relationship as container of provocative and aggressive contents. This dynamic seems to test the Other whether he/she abandons or not. It also seems that these relationships point ahead to self-damage scenarios. In the blog discourse, the female, in her relationship with the male, appears dependent and fragile.

However, the positive aspect that we notice is that the suffering and troubled relationships can be narrated in a space amongst young women. In fact, in the cluster, there is an element of temporality, invoked by words such as *to pass, life, times, moment, before, to wait, day, month*, before returning to the narrative dimension (*to write*). The experiences are shared and networked among young women, trusting and relying on each other, as shown by the words *to understand* and *to feel*. We have a glimpse of the possibility of experiencing feminine qualities, like the meeting, the relationship, the welcome.

The second cluster, named *The Hidden Self* (6963 e.c.u. out of a total of 20546, which equals 33.89%), illustrates specific but ambivalent references to the perception of the Self. It describes the need to organise an identity that is split into a public Self, or a defensive and smiling ‘mask Self’ that is adaptive in social relations, and a private Self, a depressed and lonely Self. The *mask*, the *fake smiles*, the *craving for makeup* and the *large sweaters* hiding the pain seem to be part of a habit. The everyday life mask may reflect the fake profile created in every virtual environment, which, however, allows for the narration of emotions and experience.

‘I’m the girl who has the fake smile... with wide sweatshirts and hidden hands, I’m the girl who is alone at school. I am the classic girl who hides behind a mask, not to show the severe pain that imprisons herself behind a fake smile... who cries every time she is alone, who out of the bathroom needs to wear makeup again and prepare a new smile. The classic girl who cuts herself whenever she is sad’.

This pain is looking for the other’s gaze to emerge in any virtual environment. In this cluster, the other could be identified in the *professor* or the mother (*mom*), who are invoked to look at the cuts, the scars, the pain; they represent the adults who could intercept the suffering where it is staged, the *home* and the *school*. In particular, the adolescent who self-harms could engage their mother to help bear the anger and the anguish, but also to be seen.

‘You die! I look in the mirror, I just see a girl with a vacant look now, the smile disappeared, the hair dishevelled, the face pale, the red eyes of someone who cries too much, dark circles for sleepless nights thinking about whether I really deserved to live, the wounds on the arms and on the thighs. I see, nowadays, a dead girl inside’.

The third cluster, labelled *Loneliness, hate, guilt: the melancholic emotions* (3139 e.c.u. out of a total of 20546, which equals 15.28%), highlights the narration of emotions in their purest state. The lemmas *alone, hate, pain, guilt, to suffer, self-damage* articulate a depressive and self-destructive discourse (as shown in some excerpts in which the female authors curse themselves), in which Self-harm becomes a way of punishing themselves due to a perception of the Self as guilty.

'Have you ever felt alone in a crowded room? I hated myself because I knew I was alone to bear all this pain. I hated myself because I thought of being alone because of me ... because I knew I was alone. Among people I felt alone. I felt alone. I feel lonely. I am alone. Alone. Please stop the tears streaming down the faces.'

From the narrations we can feel the depressive mood of websites pervaded by melancholic tones, like boredom, sadness and generally painful moods such as depression, guilt and shame.

'Terror is human! The problem is that I'm too weak! I'm afraid of people, of others' judgments, of love, of being alone, of not being enough, of being a mistake, of being forgotten by everyone, of losing those I love, of betrayal.'

Finally, we find the fourth cluster, called *The Self-harming act* (2888 e.c.u. out of a total of 20546, which equals 14.06%), which groups references to concrete and sensorial aspects of the conduct, like the body, weight, food and attacks against the Self. In line with the literature (Lilley & Sharman, 2016), it describes the practice and phenomenology of Self-harming behaviour, seen as a concrete fact, through words like *blood, cuts, wrist, arm, skin, scar, knife, scratches*, and also refers to the usual places (*bathroom*). There is the need to hurt oneself in order to control the emotional overload that is expelled urgently into the soma, allowing for a control that is impossible to exercise over emotions. In this sense, the terms in the cluster group present the self-harming behaviour as a form of *acting-out*. The *acting-out* is a psychic mechanism, particularly used in adolescence (Blos, 1967), indicating a totality of impulsive behaviours used to express feelings that are impossible to communicate in that moment through words but only through the body. From the narratives we observe the urgency of the act.

"She takes the phone in her hand and writes a text message. 22:30 She – 'Hello'. 22:35 He – 'Hello how are you?' 22:37 She – 'Are you with her?' 22:50 He – 'Yes'. She makes a cut on her arm but doesn't hit the vein"

The relationships on e-communities are 'blood ties' which start from the body and its scars, searching for support and mirroring (*if you stop cutting yourself, I'll stop it too*).

This aspect can reveal that the most intimate dimension of suffering can be shared among young women, who feel closer to each other because they are peers, linked by deep and mutual agreements aimed at sharing the self-destructive experience.

"... then she said to me, if you stop cutting yourself, I'll stop it too, while I was crying like an idiot after seeing her cuts... she had cut herself for me... and I could not forgive myself for having hurt her... Every day we became closer, I needed her and she needed me... often she hugged me or we remained on my bed hugging'.

The cluster includes significant references and excessive concerns about the body image (*arm, thigh, leg, belly, body*), describing female dissatisfaction with a body perceived as *fat*, so it is necessary to *lose weight, kilos and calories, no eating, be thin*. These findings confirm the literature

showing that Self-harming people have presented with negative body image attitudes (Oktan, 2017).

In this cluster it is possible to read narratives where the young bloggers shared a common ideal and unattainable body, which may invoke a thin-inspiration.

“You eat. You go to the toilet and look at yourself. Do you see you are fat? Do you depress yourself? Are you hungry? You console yourself by eating. You eat. You go to school. You listen to the voices. They make fun of you”.

4. Discussion

From our analysis some main themes emerged; now, we will discuss them and for each one we will illustrate the psychic function that the narration of Self-harm through the blogs seems to take. In our study, the theme of *relationships* represents a dense and significant dimension for young women who self-harm; in fact, the relational suffering is transferred onto the body, which suffers the pain of abandonments or partner dependences.

As shown in literature, it is often the recognition of the dependence on the other that triggers the act of self-harm, which, in turn, risks destroying the relationship (Ruggiero, 2007); at the same time, the pain of the loss of the relationship can generate a sense of despair that needs to be evacuated via self-destructive acts. However, the fourth cluster shows that the relationships in a blog may offer a mirroring function (Foulkes, 1964), as a group supportive factor, able to reflect similarities and to develop factors of aggregation, which allow for the narration of the experience, and therefore meaning-making, amongst people who have experienced the same thing.

In this sense, the whole blog community gives emotional support to those who self-harm. As shown in other studies, online communication of Self-harming behaviours may help reduce feelings of isolation because users get to read stories of others like them (Baker & Lewis 2013), and feel free to show authentic aspects of their personality (Lewis & Seko 2016). Blogs, as shown in our previous study (Margherita & Gargiulo, 2018), carry out some important interpersonal functions; in this case we can observe that they have the function of mutual support among the young users.

From our study, the subject of *identity* emerged, in the references to a “hidden Self”. The female identity in the virtual environment is hidden by fake profiles, just as their offline Self normally hides behind smiles and makeup. At the same time, blogs enable them to give voice to the private Self through the narratives of suffering and painful emotions.

This oscillation between what is visible and not visible describes the ambivalence that has typically been observed in offline behaviour. In fact, from a psychodynamic perspective, Self-harm has been seen to be characterized by the dynamics of masking/exhibition of cuts, research/avoidance of the Other, quoting the expression *hidden self-harm* (Turp, 2003). In this sense, the Self-harm, as a modification of the skin, represents a marker of identity in a continuous game of looks and provocative acts aimed at the other, in particular the mother, as Lemma, quoting Winnicott (1971), defines “*the (m)other as mirror*” (2005).

The need to be seen, and maybe helped, emerges; the online dynamic could replicate the offline one of the Self-mask, but, at the same time, allows the experience of Self-harm to emerge and be narrated in a protected space. In this sense, Self-harm blogs may be used as tools of self-disclosure, where it is possible to narrate the authentic and suffering Self and to ask for help.

Regarding the theme of *emotions* within the narratives, sadness and hate are the most frequent, in line with the literature (Lewis & Baker, 2011). Narrating the scars provides the possibility of recognizing and labelling the emotions, of activating a process of meaning making, of sharing meanings in a compassionate and non-judgmental space. Thus, narrating emotion through the blog allows for a transformative movement from the inside to the outside, and therefore assumes a function of emotional regulation.

Emotion regulation (Gross, 1998), as shown in the literature, is one of the main functions that Self-harming behaviour assumes in the psychic economy of the individual (Gratz, 2007), realizing a dynamic that expels the affects in the soma. Thus, the studies also suggest that the most common motivation, referred by those who Self-harm, is to regulate, control or express intense and pervasive emotions, such as anger, boredom and sadness, or generally painful moods (Klonsky, 2007; Mikolajczak, Petrides, & Hurry, 2009; Nock, 2009; Nixon, Cloutier, & Aggarwal, 2002). From our study it emerged that emotions are projected on to the blog. Therefore, we observe that Self-harm blogs also have an intra-psychic function of emotion regulation, which, offline, belongs to the Self-harming behaviour.

In conclusion, from an analysis of the blogs, it emerges that the meanings that are co-constructed in narrations of Self-harm also regard the perception of femininity as fragile and suffering in the relationship with the male.

The young bloggers recognize themselves in a common feeling, in a collective female pain that passes through the injured body and through a hidden identity; in fact, the identification through a common pain, which starts with the female body, could be one of the elements that holds them together.

5. Conclusion

Our study has shown a female gender salience in the Self-harm blogs, which are declined in the feminine and the bloggers seem to organize a feminine narrative cultural environment.

Young women with experience of Self-harm are searching for a space where they can express, can make meaning of, their suffering and be seen and understood by the other. Although the blog is a first form of narration of the experience, it constitutes a potential context for meaning-making because it is written to the Self and also to a virtual other who welcomes and can transform meanings and emotions.

We have illustrated how the narration of Self-harm in a blog may have different functions. First of all, it can be a helpful tool of self-disclosure: if the Self-harm has been interpreted as a “signing with the scar” used to feel real (Straker, 2006) the Self-harm blog may be interpreted as a “signing with the narrative”, a kind of autobiographical memory which uses the device of narration to emerge, to be seen by the self and by the other.

Furthermore, the Self-harm blogs could have a function of emotion regulation, allowing the naming and expressing of feelings and thoughts. Future research could investigate the preventive function of blogs which allows users to represent emotions which otherwise may be expressed through the self-harming act.

Finally, the blogs relating to Self-harming behaviour revealed a social dimension, offering a space in which the narratives may be contained and may offer a mirroring and a support to others with Self-harm. Young women with Self-harming behaviour choose to be a part of a network which guarantees support and visibility, in which emotions can be expressed. Therefore, these blogs could offer mutual support.

The analysis of narratives allowed us to identify some specific needs of young women who self-harm, like the relational suffering, the emotional processing, the desire to narrate and share personal authenticity, the need to manage the urgency of the self-destructive act, which, as clinicians, we can further investigate. Therefore, considering Self-harm blogs as a space in which it is possible to intercept a help-seeking, we can look at the virtual environment as a clinical resource in which it is possible to plan and activate specific programs of prevention and intervention, in order to reach those with an experience of Self-harm.

The study is not free from limitations. First, the narratives used in the present study may not generalize how all individuals would describe the Self-harming behaviours, in particular those who do not provide online narratives about their experiences or those that choose websites that are different from blogs. Another limitation we encountered in the study included the

monitoring of websites, which can unexpectedly be closed. Finally, the main limitation of the study regards the users' declared demographic data, in fact many individuals who write about their experiences online share rich information about their behaviour but little about who they are; however, we are interested in themes and discourses shared in blogs. In conclusion, we perceive a need for continued research in this area and for more qualitative studies in general.

References

1. Anderson-Butcher, D., Lasseigne, A., Ball, A., Brzozowski, M., Lehnert, M., & McCormick, B.L. (2010). Adolescent weblog use: risky or protective? *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 27(1), 63-77.
2. Andover, M. S., Primack, J. M., Gibb, B. E., & Pepper, C. M. (2010). An examination of non-suicidal self-injury in men: do men differ from women in basic NSSI characteristics? *Archive Suicide Research*, 14(1), 79-88.
3. Argamon, S., Koppel, M., Pennebaker, J. W., & Schler, J. (2007). Mining the blogosphere: Age, gender and the varieties of self-expression. *First Monday*, 12(9).
4. Blos, P. (1967). The second individuation process of adolescence. *The psychoanalytic study of the child*, 22, 162.
5. Bolasco, S. (1999). Analisi multidimensionale dei dati. Metodi, strategie e criteri d'interpretazione. [Multidimensional Analysis of Data. Methods, Strategies and Criteria for Interpretation]. Roma: Carocci.
6. Boyd, D., Ryan, J., & Leavitt, A. (2011). Pro-self-harm and the visibility of youth-generated problematic content. *A Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society*, 7, 1–31.
7. Bresin, K., & Schoenleber, M. (2015). Gender differences in the prevalence of nonsuicidal self-injury: A meta-analysis. *Clinical Review Psychology*, 38, 55-64.
8. British Psychological Society (2013). *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research*. INF206/1.2013. Leicester: Author. Available from: www.bps.org.uk/publications/policy-and-guidelines/research-guidelines-policy-documents/research-guidelines-poli
9. Brown, R. C., & Plener, P. L. (2017). Non-suicidal Self-injury in adolescence. *Curr Psychiatry Rep*, 19(20), 1-8.
10. Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
11. Cipriani, A., Cella, S., & Cotrufo, P. (2017). Nonsuicidal Self-injury: a systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8(8):1946.
12. Claes, L., Vandereycken, W., & Vertommen, H. (2007). Self-injury in female versus male psychiatric patients: A comparison of characteristics, psychopathology and aggression regulation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 42, 611-621.
13. Corrao, F. (1985). *Il senso dell'analisi. Teoria e prassi dell'evento*. In Orme Vol. II, Milan: Cortina Editore. [The meaning of the analysis. Theory and praxis of the event].
14. Davis, S, & Lewis, C. A., (2018). Impassioned communication and virtual support roles of online postings: The case of self-harmers. *Illness Crisis & Loss*.
15. Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage.
16. Dyson, M.P., Hartling, L., Shulhan, J., Chisholm, A., Milne, A., Sundar, P., et al. (2016), A Systematic Review of Social Media Use to Discuss and View Deliberate Self-Harm Acts. *PLoS ONE* 11(5): e0155813.
17. Farber, S., Jackson, C.C., Tabin, J.K., & Bachar, E. (2007). Death and Annihilation Anxieties in Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia and Self-Mutilation. *Psychoanal. Psychol.*, 24, 28.

18. Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., Jurist, E. & Target, M. (2002). *Affect Regulation, Mentalization and the Development of the Self*. New York: Other Press.
19. Foulkes, S.H. (1964). *Therapeutic Group Analysis*. (Karnac reprint 2002).
20. Gargiulo, A., Plener, P.L., Baus, N., Margherita, G., Brunner, R., Kaes, M., & Kapusta, N. (2014). Autolesività non suicidaria (NSSI) e Disturbo da Comportamento Suicidario (SBD) nella recente pubblicazione del DSM-5. *Minerva Psichiatrica*, 55, 2, 83-90.
21. Gargiulo, A., & Margherita, G. (2014). Autolesività non suicidaria e genere: rassegna teorica e riflessioni psicodinamiche. *Infanzia e Adolescenza*, 13(2): 119-128.
22. Gill, A.J, Newson, S., & Oberlander, J. (2009). What Are They Blogging About? Personality, Topic and Motivation in Blogs. Proceedings of the Third International ICWSM Conference, 18-25.
23. Gratz, K.L. (2007). Targeting Emotion Dysregulation in the Treatment of Self-Injury. *Journal of Clinical Psychology. Session*, 63(11), 1091–1103.
24. Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. *Review of General Psychology*, 2(3), 271-299.
25. Johnson, G. M., Zastawny, S., & Kulpa, A. (2010). E-Message Boards for Those Who Self-Injure: Implications for E-Health. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 8, 566-569.
26. Jones, R, Sharkey, S., Ford, T., Emmens, T., Hewis, E., Smithson, J., Sheaves, B., & Owens, C. 2011). Online discussion forums for young people who self-harm: user views. *The Psychiatrist*, 35, 364-368,
27. Klonsky, E.D. (2011). Non-suicidal self-injury in United States adults: Prevalence, sociodemographics, topography and functions. *Psychological Medicine*, 41, 1981–1986.
28. Klonsky, E.D. (2007). The function of deliberate self-injury. A review of evidence. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27, 226-239.
29. Klonsky, E.D., & Glenn, C. (2009). Assessing the functions of non-suicidal self- injury: Psychometric properties of the inventory of statements about self-injury (ISAS). *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, 31, 215–219.
30. Lancia, F. (2004). *Tools for text analysis. An introduction to the use of T-LAB*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
31. Lancia, F. (2008). *Word co-occurrence and similarity in meaning. Some methodological issues*. In: *Mind as Infinite Dimensionality* (eds S. Salvatore & J. Valsiner) (2003) 1–39. Carlo Amore, Roma, Italy.
32. Lemma, A. (2005). *Under the skin. A Psychoanalytic study of the body modification*. London: Routledge.
33. Lewis, S.P., & Baker, T.G. (2011). The possible risks of self-injury web sites: a content analysis. *Archives Suicide Research*, 15(4), 390-6.
34. Lewis, S.P., & Seko, Y. (2015). A double-edged sword: a review of benefits and risks of online nonsuicidal self-injury activities. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 72(3), 249-62.
35. Lilley, R., & Sharman, R. (2016). Content Analysis of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury Posts on Tumblr Blogs. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 25(3), 139.
36. Margherita, G., Boursier, V., Gargiulo, A. & Nicolò, G. (2017). Sognare e narrare la maternità: un'analisi tematica dei sogni delle gestanti. *Psicologia Clinica dello Sviluppo*, 21(2): 237-255.
37. Margherita, G., & Gargiulo, A. (2018). A comparison between pro-anorexia and non-suicidal self-injury blogs: From symptom-based identity to sharing of emotions. *Psychodynamic Practice*, 24(4): 346-363.

38. Margherita, G., & Gargiulo, A. (2014). Attacks on the body in the virtual era: an analysis of Blogs Pro-Anorexia and Pro-Self-Injury. In “*Avances en Psicología Clínica, 2014*”. A cura di Amparo Díaz-Román, Eva Hita-Yáñez y M^a Teresa Ramiro, Asociación Española de Psicología Conductual (AEPC), pp. 477-486.
39. Margherita, G., Gargiulo, A. & Martino, M.L. (2015). Dream narration in healthy and at-risk pregnancy. *Dreaming*, 25(2), 88-102.
40. Margherita, G., Troisi, G., Tessitore, F. & Gargiulo, A. (2017). Teen mothers who are daughters of teen mothers: Psychological intergenerational dimensions of early motherhood. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 83, 294-301.
41. Mars, B., Heron, J., Biddle, L., Donovan, J.L., Holley, R., Piper, M. et al. (2015). Exposure to, and searching for, information about suicide and self-harm on the Internet: Prevalence and predictors in a population based cohort of young adults. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 185, 239-245
42. Martino, M.L., Gargiulo, A., Lemmo, D., & Margherita, G. (2019). Cancer blog narratives: the experience of under-fifty women with breast cancer during different times after diagnosis. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(1). 154-173. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol15/iss1/1>
43. Martino, M.L., Lemmo, D., Gargiulo, A., Barberio, D., Abate, V., Avino, F., & Tortoriello, R. (2019). Underfifty Women and Breast Cancer: Narrative Markers of Meaning-Making in Traumatic Experience. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10: 618.
44. Meritxell, R.S. & Lopez-Garcia, G. (2017). Contemporary Portrayals of Women and Femininity. A Case Study of Lifestyle Blogs in the U.S. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 7(2), 186–210.
45. Mikolajczak, M., Petrides, K.V., Hurry, J. (2009). Adolescents choosing self-harm as an emotion regulation strategy: The protective role of trait emotional intelligence. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 48, 181–193.
46. Millard, C. (2013). Making the cut: the production of 'self-harm' in post-1945 Anglo-Saxon psychiatry. *History of the Human Science*, 26(2), 126-150.
47. Mitchell, K.J., Wells, M., Priebe, G., & Ybarra, M.L. (2014). Exposure to websites that encourage self-harm and suicide: Prevalence rates and association with actual thoughts of self-harm and thoughts of suicide in the United States. *Journal of Adolescence*, 37(8), 1335–1344.
48. Motz, A. (2001). *The Psychology of Female Violence*. Sussex, UK: Brunner-Routledge.
49. Nixon, M.K., Cloutier, P.F., & Aggarwal, S. (2002). Affect regulation and addictive aspects of repetitive Self-injury in hospitalized adolescents. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 41(11), 1333-1341.
50. Nock, M. (2009). Why Do People Hurt Themselves? New Insights Into the Nature and Functions of Self-Injury. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18, 78.
51. Oksanen, A., Näsi, M., Minkkinen, J., Keipi, T., Kaakinen, M., & Räsänen, P. (2016). Young people who access harm-advocating online content: A four-country survey. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 10(2), article 6.

52. Oktan, V. (2017). Self-Harm Behaviour in Adolescents: Body Image and Self-Esteem. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 27(2), 177-189.
53. Pennebaker, J. W., & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a story. The health benefits of narrative. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55, 1243-1254.
54. Rastier, F., Cavazza, M., & Abeillé, A. (2002). *Semantics for descriptions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
55. Reinert, M. (1995). The lexical worlds of a corpus of 304 narrations of nightmares through Alceste method. In Cipriani R and Bolasco S (eds) *Qualitative research and computer*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
56. Ruggiero, I. (2007). Dinamiche narcisistiche nell'autolesionismo adolescenziale. *Richard e Piggie*, 15(2), 156-173. [Narcissistic dynamics in adolescents with self-harming behaviors]
57. Salvatore, S., & Freda, M.F. (2011). Affect, unconscious and sensemaking. A psychodynamic, semiotic and dialogic model. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 29, 119-135.
58. Schler, J., Koppel, M., Argamon, S., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2006). Effects of age and gender on blogging. In *AAAI spring symposium: Computational approaches to analyzing weblogs* (Vol. 6, pp. 199-205).
59. Seko, Y., Kidd, S. A., Wiljer, D., & McKenzie, K. J. (2015). On the creative edge. Exploring motivations for creating non-suicidal self-injury content online. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(10), 1334-1346.
60. Sornberger, M. J., Heath, N. L., Toste, J. R., & McLouth, R. (2012). Nonsuicidal self-injury and gender: patterns of prevalence, methods, and locations among adolescents. *Suicide Life Threat. Behav.*, 42, 266-278.
61. Straker, G. (2006). Signing with a Scar: Understanding Self-Harm, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 16:1, 93-112
62. Sternudd, H. T. (2016). Ellie's first time: constructing self-cutting in a teendrama. *Journal of Gender Studies*,
63. Sutherland, O., Breen, A. V., & Lewis, S. P. (2013). Discursive Narrative Analysis: A Study of Online Autobiographical Accounts of Self-Injury. *The Qualitative Report*, 18,1-17.
64. Turp, M. (2003). *Hidden Self-harm: Narratives from Psychotherapy*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.
65. Van Doorn, N., van Zoonen, L., & Wyatt, S. (2007). Writing from experience. Presentations of Gender Identity on Weblogs. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 14(2), 143-158.
66. Valencia-Agundo, F., Corbet Burcher, G., & Ezpeleta, L., & Kramer, T. (2018). Nonsuicidal self-injury in community adolescents: A systematic review of prospective predictors, mediators and moderators. *Journal of Adolescence*, 65, 25-38.
67. Valsiner, J., & Rosa, A. (2007). *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
68. Winnicott, D. W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. London: Tavistok.
69. Whitlock, J., Ladder, W., & Conterio, K. (2007). The Internet and Self-Injury: What Psychotherapists Should Know. *Journal of Clinical Psychology: In Session*, 63(11), 1135-1143.
70. Whitlock, J. L., Muehlenkamp, J., Purington, A., Eckenrode, J., Barreira, J., Abrams, G. B., Knox, K. (2011). Non-suicidal self-injury in a college population: General trends and sex differences. *Journal of American College Health*, 59, 691-698.
71. Whitlock, J. L., & Rodham, K. (2013). Understanding nonsuicidal self-injury in youth. *School Psychology Forum: Research in Practice*, 7(4), 1-18.

72. Whitlock, J. L., Powers, J. L., & Eckenrode, J. (2006). The virtual cutting edge: The internet and adolescent self-injury. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(3), 407-417.



©2019 by the Author(s); licensee Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology, Messina, Italy. This article is an open access article, licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported License. Mediterranean Journal of Clinical Psychology, Vol.7, No. 1 (2019).

International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

DOI: 10.6092/2282-1619/2019.7.2055