

# ***Mein Nick bin ich!* Nicknames in a German Forum on Eating Disorders**

Wyke Stommel

Cornelia Goethe Centrum  
JWG-Universität Frankfurt/Main

*This article demonstrates how nicknames that are used by participants in a German forum on eating disorders can be read as identity displays and how they may be related to eating disorders. A qualitative analysis of 83 nicknames of the Hungrig-Online forum reveals that denotational and stereotypical features, along with well-known referents of the names, interdependently characterize participants. Persona attributes such as smallness, weightlessness, childishness, negative self-evaluation, and depression, but also (arguably) self-confidence, are shown to be apparent in the nicknames; many of these attributes can be linked to multifaceted femininity. These findings are then related to general characteristics of eating disorders. In concluding, the far-reaching rules for registration of nicknames in the forum are taken into account and questioned, for it may be that in sensitive online groups, nicknames play an especially important role in identity construction.*

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## **Introduction**

Identity, or the role of the self, is a crucial factor in eating disorders. Therefore, nicknames as representing or constructing identity are relevant phenomena in this context and may even be claimed to play a *significant* role. Although an accepted phrase is that the anorectic woman “expresses with her body what she is unable to tell us with words” (Orbach, 2001, p. 83), nicknaming as an emblematic practice accords with certain treatment types of eating disorders which focus on discursive aspects (e.g., Lock, Epston, & Maisel, 2004). A typical symptom of eating disorders is negative self evaluation or lack of self worth (Treasure, Schmidt, & Furth, 2005). If sufferers succeed in combating the eating disorder, their recovery may be related to changes with regard to the self or personal identity, which again may be related to discursive identity practices such as nicknaming.

The central question of this study is how nicknames (also referred to as “nicks”) construct identities or selves<sup>1</sup> in the German forum *Hungrig-Online* (henceforth

referred to as HO). Unlike in pro-anorectic web-based environments (see, e.g., Chesley, Alberts, Klein, & Kreipe, 2003; Dias, 2003), where women defend and encourage a relentless pursuit of slimness, in the HO forum persons with eating problems intend to recover from their illness. The forum members appear to experience their nicknames as extremely important. Thus it is first argued that nicknames are devices for identity and gender construction in HO. An approach that conceptualizes nicknames as demeanor indexicals or actor-focal emblems (Agha, 2007) serves as the theoretical background for reading stereotypical persona attributes in nicknames.

If nicknames are viewed as emblems of self construction on the Internet, this raises questions about what kinds of identities appear in nicknames in an online peer environment such as HO.<sup>2</sup> In order to address these questions, a brief exploration of the role of the self in eating disorders is presented. Special attention is paid to feminist approaches to eating disorders, which attempt to account for the fact that it is predominantly women who suffer from such disorders. Subsequently, nicknames are theorized as indexical demeanors with denotational properties in order to argue for a reading of nicknames as (culture-specific) signs in text-in-context, and the concept of gender as the most common identity aspect constructed through names is elaborated upon. A presentation of the method follows, which includes an introduction to the HO community, including the rules that apply to the formation of nicknames, and an account of ethical research considerations in this context. The findings of the analysis reveal several recurring persona attributes such as feminine, childish, distinctive, depressed, and self-confident. The extent to which these are plausibly related to eating disorders is then explored.

### **The (Feminine) Self in Eating Disorders**

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have attempted to explain the aetiology of eating disorders. Generally, it can be stated that cultural, psychological, biological, and familial aspects come together simultaneously. In cognitive as well as interpersonal approaches to eating disorders, low self-esteem, negative self evaluation, and the tendency to judge the self largely or even exclusively in terms of shape and weight are key terms in the symptomology (Treasure et al., 2005). Additionally, many (medical, psychiatric, psychoanalytic) professionals and sufferers speak of the anorectic identity, the parasite of anorexia that has replaced the self (Epston, 2000). This phenomenon is called “egosyntonicity,” which refers to the sense, experienced by many patients, of the anorexia nervosa being a part of themselves or of their identity (Tan, Hope, & Stewart, 2003).

In line with this, recovering from an eating disorder has been described as a process of coming to sense the self (Reindl, 2001). Restarting the development of a self has been claimed to be one of the general aims of psychotherapy with the anorectic woman (Orbach, 2001). Recovery then implies that experiences which a sufferer once “put into body” have to be learned to be put into words. In contrast, however,

it has also been claimed that “words are as, if not more, problematic for women with eating disorders than their relationship to food” (Farrell, 1995, p. xiv).

In terms of the prevalence of eating disorders, combining the results of many studies in different countries, it could be stated that females account for approximately 92% of the total number of anorectics and approximately 85% of all bulimics (Krenn, 2003). Despite an increase in eating disorders and body dysmorphia among men, women still make up the vast majority of sufferers. There have been various attempts to explain the reasons for women’s increased susceptibility to anorexia and bulimia.

Feminist theorists such as Bordo (1993) and Orbach (2001) offer a sophisticated synthesis of cultural, psychological, and familial explanations. They view eating disorders as complex crystallizations of culture and see the body as a cultural text. According to these authors, two cultural phenomena drive women to hunger strike. The first is the domestic conception of femininity. Ideologically, labor is strictly divided between the sexes and requires women to learn to feed others and not the self. At the same time, girls learn to construe desires for feeding the self as greedy and excessive. The second phenomenon is that women have to embody norms traditionally associated with masculinity in order to act successfully in the professional arena: self-control, determination, emotional discipline, etc., are key ingredients in a successful career. The control and power that is required to “make it” contribute to the woman’s desire to suppress bodily impulses and needs. “The ideal of slenderness [...] and the diet and exercise regiments that have become inseparable from it, offer the illusion of meeting, through the body, the contradictory demands of the contradictory ideology of femininity” (Bordo, 1993, p. 172).

Much more could be said about the complexity of eating disorders, including paradoxes in sufferers. Here, however, the focus is not on eating disorders as such, but rather on nicknames as identity constructions. These are analyzed for aspects of personhood (among them, gender) in order to link them subsequently to self- and gender-facets of eating disorders.

## Theorizing Nicknames and Identity

Previous research has focused primarily on the denotation, or literal meanings, of nicknames. Bechar-Israeli (1995) analyzed 260 nicknames on Internet Relay Chat, identifying seven major types: 1) people using their real name, 2) nicknames related to the self, 3) names related to the medium, technology, or their nature, 4) names of flora, fauna, or objects, 5) play on words and sounds, 6) names related to figures in literature, films, fairytales, or of famous people, and 7) names related to sex and provocation. It emerged that 45% of the nicknames were related to the self, meaning that they in one way or another characterized the individual who used the nickname, for example *shydude*, *baddady*, *handsom*.

The finding that a high percentage of nicks were related to the self may be interesting as such, but what is neglected is how other types of nicknames also ascribe

characteristics to their referent. An online persona called *flower*, for example, connotes a very different identity from a nickname such as *Bonehead*. Further, Bechar-Israeli explains the relatively high number of nicks related to medium, technology, or their nature by the fact that many chat users have computer-related jobs. In other words, these nicknames do not only denote medium/technology, but also “do” the occupational identity of participants. Nicknames not only have meaning as nouns do, they also characterize their referent. Therefore, a theoretical approach to nicknames must explain the relation between denotation and the constitution of persona.

Nicknames are proper names. A characteristic of proper names is that their reference, unlike the reference of pronouns and demonstratives, does not shift from speech event to speech event (also called “speech-chain deictics”). In other words, what makes a proper name special is that it has an identical referent on different occasions. In this study, it is not this linguistic particularity of proper names that is at the center of attention. Rather, from the perspective of Agha’s (2007) theory of language and social relations, nicknames are considered as denotational units and, relatedly, as demeanor indexicals.

In addition to indicating a unique referent, a proper name, or more specifically a nickname, can also have a denotation. Traditionally, denotation in contrast to reference is thought of as utterance independent (Lyons, 1995). For example, phrases like *my dog*, *the dog*, and *the dog that bit the postman* have different referents but the same denotation, to the extent that they are all members of the class *dogs*. Agha (2007) notes, however, that this is only true in the case of literal usage; a metaphorical use of *dog* does not denote a member of the class *dogs*. Therefore, denotation is also event dependent, but not in the same way as reference.

It follows that analyzing the denotation of nicknames requires scrutinizing the event in which the nickname is used. Grammatical analysis can identify only certain aspects of denotational organization. More overtly sociological approaches are needed to answer other questions, such as: How does a nickname’s denotation relate to a person’s identity?

Here it is argued, with Agha (2007), that “a person’s social identity, or identities, become determinate only through a class of semiotic processes whereby images of personhood are coupled to or decoupled from publicly perceivable signs” (p. 233). A nickname is a publicly perceivable sign that is linked to images of personhood. As an alternative to the term “identity,” which itself does not focus on the processes by which identity is formed, Agha proposes the concept of *emblem*. An emblem involves three elements: 1) a perceivable thing/a diacritic, 2) a social persona, and 3) someone for whom it is an emblem. The focus needs to be on the relation among these elements—that is to say, not on the “thing” or on personae alone, but on acts or performances through which the two are linked.

A large majority of emblems can be found in the course of interaction, in which they emerge and fade away quickly. Another type of emblem is the enregistered<sup>3</sup> emblem, which conveys stereotypic images of persons. Through these, persons can be allocated enregistered identities, such as female/male, upper-class, and lawyer.

The nicknames of this study, described as the participant's face appearing with every contribution posted, do not emerge and fade away in interaction as emergent emblems do, which implies that they are stereotypic indexicals. However, even stereotypical indexicals appear in text-in-context, in this case the HO forum as a textual environment. When focusing on speakers' identities, one engages in the practice of reading persons. Such a semiotic activity is shaped by text-level indexical effects, but also by stereotypic social images associated with signs that specify default ways of reading persons who display them. Such stereotypes permit a decontextualized form of circulation, which means that they convert contingent and dialectical facts of persona display into seemingly stable categories of personhood. However, Agha (2007) emphasizes that:

The indices themselves only become relevant to social interaction under conditions of textuality or co-occurrence with other signs, conditions under which text-level indexical effects superimpose a further specificity upon the current construal, partly canceling, deforming, even troping upon stereotypic effects. (p. 239)

Such co-textual cues are taken into account in everyday, and thus contextualized, encounters very easily, but in moments of *decontextualized* reflection, stereotypic values of enregistered signs are more readily available for the reading of persons. Therefore, decontextualized readings of identities are inadequate as accounts of how we come to read the persons we encounter.

To transfer from stereotypes to attributes of personhood, Agha proposes Goffman's concept of *demeanor* (Goffman, 1956). Demeanor can explain how utterances allow interactants to construe attributes, or the social persona of the speaker. Demeanor is an indexical notion, in the sense that it highlights the connection between attributes displayed by acts and the actor who displays them. The perceivable feature of conduct that contextually conveys the attributes is the demeanor indexical, in other words, an actor-focal emblem; it clarifies the demeanor of the one who performs the sign. Demeanor indexicals vary with regard to their durability. Some perceivable features of persons, such as gestures and utterances, are evanescent, while others are seen as more constant characteristics. Distinguishing which characteristics count as stable and which do not requires culture-internal theories of personhood, although in occidental cultures psychological and sociological attributions are generally thought of as temporally constant. It must be stressed, however, that from culture to culture, ideas about durability of attributes, ascribed to individuals only by virtue of emblems, differ substantially in the degree to which they are objectified as stable, essential, fundamental, and so forth.

Agha's theory of language and social relations allows for an understanding of nicknames textualized in a specific online frame as:

1. proper names, which can have denotational, event-dependent properties; and
2. indexical demeanors or actor-focal emblems, which construe attributes of the actor who performs the signs, partly by means of stereotypes.

## Nicknames and Gender

A focus on gender as one type of identity construction implies that names appear as “indexical demeanors” of an extremely stringent kind. At the very beginning of life, an infant shifts from being an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” essentially by being given a girl’s or a boy’s name (Butler, 1993). This naming activity shows how a human being is brought into language and kinship through the gendered matrix (Butler, 1990). Because of the absence of visible bodily cues of gender and other physical identity markers in textual online environments, nicknames have been conceptualized as “a kind of substitute for the face and the body” (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004, p. 660). Alternatively, from a poststructuralist point of view, nicks may be argued not to be “substitutive” of the face and the body, but, rather, constitutive of the self (cf. Butler, 1993).

Of all the information that names can communicate, gender is the most common (Alford, 1988). Even if we do not know anything about a person apart from the first name, we are usually able to categorize that person as female or male, and consequently address her or him with the appropriate forms: *Ms.* or *Mr.*, *she* or *he*, *her* or *him* (Oelkers, 2004). Research on chat conversation has suggested that this is partly true for online nicknames as well (Panyametheekul & Herring, 2003; Zelenkauskaite & Herring, 2006). In studies of gender and chat communication, participants’ gender is often determined by the researchers on the basis of nicknames, although Panyametheekul and Herring also found “gender indeterminate” nicks in a Thai chat room. However, the way in which semantic criteria apply in gender determination is not specified in these studies. For instance, the Thai nick *Maunjallo* is classified as male because it means “seems smart” and *Maunsuey* is classified as female, because it means “seems beautiful” (Panyametheekul & Herring, 2003, n.p.).

In the present study, gender is not analyzed in order to determine the participants’ gender, but so as to understand if and how it can be read as a persona attribute in nicknames of a specific forum. For this reason, the present study focuses on the features that render a nickname gendered (or not). Thus, the nickname *Maunsuey* (“seems beautiful”), which denotes the feature “beautiful,” and is stereotypically read as feminine, would be analyzed as an actor-focal emblem of femininity.

Gender is an identity category in names that can be conveyed both through denotation and stereotypic effects. First of all, gender can often be identified in phonological features of names. In German, names ending in *-a* or *-e* are almost always female, and names ending in *-n*, *-s* or *-d* are predominantly male (Gerhards, 2003). Nicknames in the forum also display phonological features. Especially in nicknames that are novel formations, implying that they possess no lexical denotation, the phonological features may make the nickname seem female or male. In this way, for example, the nick *kareja* seems female, because of the ending *-a*.

Personal nouns or noun phrases such as *Blue Guy* construct gender through the lexical gender of the personal noun (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2001), meaning that the nick *Blue Guy* denotes a male. Herring (2001) characterizes apparent gender, for instance through nicknames, as typical for online communication, but in the HO forum

there are many nicknames which are less apparently gendered. If nicknames are viewed as emblems, stereotypic effects of nicknames in text-in-context can also be related to gender. For instance, nicknames in the HO forum that denote flowers metaphorically index femininity (see also the Findings section, below), for instance *marienblume* (German “daisy”). With regard to demeanor, the actor-focal emblem *marienblume* constructs the actor, this particular HO participant, as sweet, small, and innocent.

Summing up, gender in nicknames can be performed through denotational and stereotypical features. However, these features can also work reciprocally. For example, the grammatical gender of nouns may be related to the ascription of stereotypically gendered attributes to the actor. Konishi (1991) showed that in German, high frequency words carry connotations of femininity and masculinity, depending on their grammatical gender. For instance the nickname *\*Schneeflocke\** (German “snowflake”) is grammatically feminine and may also stereotypically be read as feminine because of its attributes of softness, lightness, etc. This happens in other grammatical gender languages as well. A nickname such as *tortuga* (Spanish “turtle”), which is grammatically feminine, may also be stereotypically feminine. Put differently, a reading of *turtle* as an emblem constructs attributes such as small, peaceful, and reliable.<sup>4</sup> These characteristics are stereotypically feminine, which corresponds with *tortuga*’s grammatical gender.

## Methodology

### Context

The German *Hungrig-Online* portal was launched in 1999 by an association that was founded originally for the purpose of providing information on various eating disorders, including anorexia, bulimia, binge eating disorder, and compulsive overeating. In 2000, the forum was added to the website ([www.hungrig-online.de](http://www.hungrig-online.de)) with the objective of creating a space for people with eating disorders to offer and receive support. Since then, the forum has grown extensively; it currently consists of 17 thematic sub-forums addressing topics of discussion such as: new here, dreams and fears, causes, eating practices, eating disorders and men, relationships, ex-sufferers, and miscellaneous.

All postings are publicly archived and freely accessible; to date the archive contains over 500,000 postings, and the forum counts over 21,000 registered nicknames. This number, however, is misleading, since at least 14,000 users have never posted a contribution, which leaves approximately 7,000 active members. This number must be nuanced further, since within a random 40-hour period (at the beginning of January 2007), 181 members posted on the site. To place this number in a wider context, one week saw 300 members post, while during one month 574 members posted, and in one 12-month period (roughly, 2006), 1,526 members posted to the HO forum.

A survey conducted in 2003 (Leiberich, 2005; Leiberich, Nedoschill, Nickel, Loew, & Tritt, 2004) received filled-out questionnaires from approximately 1,000

HO participants, of whom 97% were female. It appeared that 15% were younger than 18 years old, 30% between 18 and 22, 32% between 22 and 30, and 13% over 30 years old. The types of eating disorders suffered by respondents were predominantly anorexia and bulimia (anorexia 39%, bulimia 34.5%, and anorectic bulimia 20.3%). This context information is used in this study as additional support for the analysis. For instance, the numerical dominance of females and the participants' medical backgrounds offer contextual support for interpreting a somewhat ambiguous nickname as belonging to a female participant.

In order to contribute to threads of the forum, one needs to register. Irrespective of their relation to eating disorders, sufferers, relatives, and friends alike are welcome to join. After logging in, the chosen nickname will always appear on the screen when the participant adds a posting to the forum, which means that the nickname appears as the participant's "face" with every contribution. HO explicitly forbids nickname change in the forum rules, with the argument that other members would have trouble recognizing the participant under a new name. Nevertheless, a participant who feels the need to change her/his nickname can escape this rule by registering anew under a different nickname.

The HO association has also set some constraints on the coining of nicknames. The forum rules state that a pseudonym may not have an offensive, mistakable, insinuating, or acrimonious character or be identical to the name of another person, institution, or registered brand. What is understood as offensive, mistakable, insinuating, or acrimonious is left implicit. It is not uncommon for a nickname to be rejected on the basis of this rule. The novice member is then told to choose another nickname.

The meaning of nicknames is a regular topic of conversation in the HO forum. A look at talk about nicknames reveals a great interest in the power of nicks as self-constructing units. Five utterances, drawn from the forum, illustrate this.

1. "If I changed my nickname, it would feel as if I gave up part of myself."
2. "Mein Nick bin ich ('my nick is me'), I would never change it!"

Utterance (1) underlines the importance of a nickname to the self, as if losing the nickname would be equivalent to losing an arm. Even understanding "part" rather metaphorically, it still suggests that the nickname is treated as an essential component of the self. Example (2) is even more extreme, stating that the nickname is identical with the self. This one-to-one mapping of nickname with self seems positive, in terms of accepting the nickname as one is supposed to accept oneself. It implies that changing the nickname would affect the self.

The following quotes further illustrate the interrelation of the nickname and the self:

3. "When I feel well, I am irritated by my nick, but apart from that, it fits."
4. "If I was better again at some point, I would need a new nick..."

In (3) it appears that the nick stands for the negative state of the self. First, it is presupposed that the “I” knows two conditions: one in which it feels well and one which is “apart from” feeling well. The nickname fits with the latter condition and is thereby a constituent of the negative self. A similar orientation can be read from (4), where the nick is temporarily bound to the current state of the self, namely the eating disordered self.

The final example (5) shows how the nickname can become more important than the real first name, implying that the nickname does its job of constructing identity better than the first name.

5. “I identify more with \*NICKNAME\*, than with my real name.”

The analysis presented below reveals which types of names fulfill this essential task and how.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Although nicknames in the HO forum are found on the textual level, in the sense that they are discussed and commented on in forum interactions, this is not the level of analysis of this study. There are ethical reasons for this: It was agreed with the association *Hungrig-Online* that in this study I would not link nicknames to online personae. In other words, persona attributes were to be read from the nicknames and were not to be put in relation to utterances, in order to avoid disclosure of individual information. It was thus decided that the research would not concentrate on individuals, but rather on mechanisms or patterns.

Nonetheless, it seems worthwhile and defensible to analyze a set of nicknames from this online forum. The reason for this is that in web-based forums, a nickname appears as a label to the posting, not integrated in the sequential course of interaction and not produced by the author directly, but rather by the forum design. Whereas saying one’s name at the beginning of a telephone conversation has been demonstrated to be a highly organized phase of the call (Schegloff, 1986), in the HO forum a nickname in initial position appears as a static label of the posting, referring to the author. This automatic appending of nicknames in HO renders them worthy of investigation outside the course of interaction.

Also for ethical reasons, it was decided not to approach participants to investigate their readings of nicknames.

### **Data Collection**

The data were collected in cooperation with the HO forum. The HO team manager introduced the research to the forum and placed a call for consent for the analysis of participants’ nicknames. In the call, it was mentioned that a linguistic analysis of the nicknames was the research interest. Further, participants were discouraged from giving consent if they felt that their nickname divulged personal information (for example, if they used the nickname also in other web-based environments). The call was posted at the beginning of August 2006. After three weeks, the call was cancelled;

a total of 83 participants had given consent by directly and publicly replying to the call. In addition to their consent, participants posed many questions and gave encouraging comments, which underscores that the participants themselves had a sincere interest in (an analysis of) their nicknames.

The corpus consists of various word and phrase types, as summarized in Table 1. The analysis first distinguishes between names (= proper nouns) and nouns (= common nouns).<sup>5</sup> Names are further sub-divided into commonly known names and novel formations. Nouns are sub-divided into personal nouns (i.e., nouns which denote persons) and other nouns.

### Data Analysis

First, each nickname was analyzed for its denotational properties and emblematic (here actor-focal, context bound) stereotypical persona characteristics. For the reading of nicknames as emblems—a concept in which the person who reads the signs is explicitly incorporated—in this study the author was the main reader of the nicknames. Additionally, mother tongue speakers of German and research colleagues were asked for their readings and understandings of the nicknames. Subsequently, commonalities and differences among the nicknames were grouped, first with respect to denotational properties and second on the level of person attributes as demeanor indexicals.<sup>6</sup>

As has been argued above, denotation is not event independent, for instance in metaphorical uses of words. For the current analysis, the event must be described as interaction in the HO forum. This means that a nickname denoting a plant, an animal, or a star, for example, must be read metaphorically. Also, a nickname that denotes “child” must be read metaphorically in HO. The nick *Pueppi*<sup>23</sup> (German) in

**Table 1** Word and phrase types in the corpus of HO nicknames

	Word types in HO nicknames	Number of nicks
1	Commonly known names	
	a) first names	34
	b) place names	2
2	Novel formations (e.g., <i>kareja</i> , <i>Lupasimo</i> , <i>Nezadim</i> )	7
3	Nouns and noun phrases	
	a) personal nouns (e.g., <i>Ampelweibchen</i> —German “small traffic light female,” <i>Ms. Dust</i> , <i>Blue Guy</i> )	8
	b) other nouns (e.g., <i>baerli</i> —German “small bear,” <i>snjorblom</i> —Icelandic “snow flower”)	25
4	Adjectives (e.g., <i>nice</i> )	3
5	Verb forms (e.g., <i>*Vivo*</i> —Italian “I live”)	2
6	Exclamations (e.g., <i>nixwieweg</i> —German “let’s get out of here”)	2
		83

HO metaphorically denotes “silly, over-styled woman,” although in other contexts, where the referent is a member of the class *dolls*, it denotes “small doll.”

## Findings

Almost half of the nicknames are more or less commonly known first names, such as *Samirah* and *Ivon*. The corpus includes 34 first names, of which 25 were female, seven male, and two either female or male. In the group of other nouns, gender plays an evident role. Of the eight personal nouns in the forum (see Table 1), five are lexically female, one lexically male, and two are not lexically gendered. Of the other nouns (25), 11 appeared to be grammatically feminine, two masculine, and eight neuter. Taken together, the first names and nouns (67 of the total of 83 nicknames = 81%) show a clear predominance of femaleness. However, the nicks are not always gendered. For instance, the nickname *paper cup* does not seem to be gendered in the HO context. Therefore, although gender seems to be an important identity category in HO nicknames, it is not obligatory.

## Language Origin

The nicknames show a rich variety of language origins. The languages used, including the languages from which the commonly known first names are derived, are: German, Southern German, Spanish, English, Italian, Swedish, Icelandic, Latin, Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Finnish, Hungarian, and Czech. In terms of demeanor or identity, the participants with non-German nicks (which are not frequently used in German contexts) seem special, distinctive, or even exotic.

Many nicknames that are first names are of non-German origin. *Iveta* is a Czech first name, *Raya* is Bulgarian, *Alessia* is Italian, and *Finja* is Finnish. Modifications appear in spelling or in the addition of numbers, such as in *Sophia\_21*. These first names are coded for gender, which means that they are stereotypical indexicals for females or males. Another set of nicknames is not gender coded. They seem to be novel formations, i.e., newly invented. Only their phonological ending makes them sound like female or male names, e.g., *kareja* and *Taurelia*. These endings render the nicks gendered and attribute gender as a durable characteristic to the person carrying the nick.

## Denotation

In the group of nicknames that are not commonly known proper names, some denotational patterns can be observed. As shown in Table 2, flora, fauna, and meteorology/astrology as different parts of nature are frequently used resources for nicknames. Generally, it could be argued that in occidental culture, nature (when not conceived of as aggressive, wild, or powerful, but rather as “mother earth”) is linked to femininity, which renders a “nature” nickname a demeanor indexical of a specific type of femininity. However, such meanings are highly dependent on the specific context. More precisely, the meaning of a metaphor such as WOMAN IS NATURE is

**Table 2** Examples of nicknames in the category NATURE

Flora	Fauna	Meteorology/astrology
<i>Loewen_maeulchen</i> (German “small snap dragon”)	<i>Song_bird</i>	<i>Lluvia</i> (Spanish “rain”)
<i>Snjorblum</i> (Icelandic “snow flower”)	<i>Schattenvoegelchen</i> (German “small shadow bird”)	* <i>Schneeflocke</i> * (German “snow flake”)
<i>blackroseGeb1987</i> (Geb = geboren – German “born”)	<i>baerli</i> (German “small bear”)	<i>Cielo</i> (Italian/Spanish “sky”/“heaven”)
<i>marienblume</i> (German “daisy”)	<i>tortuga</i> (Spanish “turtle”)	<i>Estrella1981</i> (Spanish “star”)

dependent on where, in which community of practice, it occurs (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). In the HO forum, with a very high percentage of young women who struggle with eating disorders, even in nicknames such as *Loewen\_maeulchen* (German “small snap dragon,” but also “small lion’s mouth”) and *baerli* (German “small bear”), the “smallness” of the animals involved suggests that they should not be read as aggressive, masculine manifestations of nature. A small bear is a cuddly toy, rather than an aggressive beast.

In addition to being related to nature, these nicknames denote other interesting aspects. Most nicknames in the category NATURE denote *small* animals, flowers, or plants. “Smallness” or diminutiveness (as marked, e.g., by the use of diminutive suffixes in German) can be considered a metaphorical property of femaleness on the grounds that women are typically physically smaller than men, but also (and more interestingly) because it treats women like children, small animals, and other things that are harmless, vulnerable, and cute. This representation of femininity is well-known in Western theory and literature (Beauvoir, 1949/1992; Friedan, 1963/1966; Millett, 1969/1985). Moreover, “small” maps metaphorically onto “insignificant,” “trivial,” and “less important.” Smallness in nicks as applied to the self could thus be interpreted as signaling femaleness, child-like qualities, and/or self-deprecation.

Further, almost all of these nicknames denote light or weightless things or beings, such as rain, snow, stars, and sky, but also small animals and flowers. The lightness can be contrasted with at least one nickname from the collection of nature nicks, although it does not neatly fit in the flora, fauna, nor meteorology/astrology categories. *Sumpfperl* (German “small marsh”) is in terms of demeanor not light but rather depressed. In this context, the metaphorical denotation of *marsh* suggests a person who is being sucked into the marsh and is perhaps beyond help. If “marsh” is read metaphorically as the eating disorder, this person does not appear to have much hope for a cure. Also not very hopeful or positive is *Schattenvoegelchen* (German “small shadow bird”), which despite smallness and probably lightness, displays characteristics of hiding and possibly depression.

A number of personal nouns are also used as nicknames, for instance *Ampelweibchen* (German “small traffic light female”). This is a modification of the term *Ampelmännchen* (German “small traffic light male”), which is a well-known and commercialized figure on German traffic lights. In fact the little man *is* the traffic light, turning red and green. In terms of attributes, the characteristic of constantly changing colors suggests an unstable mind or a person that frequently changes her mind or does not know what she wants. With the nickname *Pueppi23* (German “small doll,” in this context to be read as “silly, over-styled woman”), the actor is ascribed the derogatory features “silly” and “over-styled.” *Kellerkind* (German “cellar child”) obviously denotes a child, and when referring to a teenager, adolescent, or adult, projects the characteristics of a child onto the actor. *Kellerkind* as an actor-focal emblem invokes attributes such as scared, hiding, small, dark, and helpless. In contrast to these nicknames, which display negative persona attributes, stands a nickname such as \* + \*SaLTaTriX\_NiViS\* + \* (Latin “female snow dancer”). A stereotypical reading of this nickname yields personal attributes such as gracious, light, soft, pure, and distinctive.

It must be noted that almost all personal nouns/noun phrases are female. Only *Blue Guy*, which suggests a rather depressed persona because of the use of “blue,” is male. There is one personal noun that constructs a potentially self-confident identity: *quorkepf*. At first sight, this does not appear to be not a personal noun, but when read as a modification of *Querkopf* (German “awkward customer”), it can be seen as an emblem of stubbornness or obstinacy.

### “Eating Disordered” Nicknames

None of the nicknames in the corpus literally denotes food or eating behavior, most probably because nicknames that do so are filtered out by the HO moderators. However, in the practice of “reading persons,” as Agha (2007) called it, there are a few nicknames that can be linked to eating disorders. *Schattenvoegelchen* (German “small shadow bird”) evokes an image of the body of the participant. The “shadow” in this nickname implies a glimpse of a body, perhaps an emaciated body, an anorectic body, the result of starvation. In this manner and in this context, an eating disordered body can be read in a nickname. The second notable example is *Hamsterbacke* (German “greedy, voracious person,” but literally “hamster cheek”). This is the only nickname that can be claimed to directly embody a symptom of disturbed eating behavior, namely bingeing.

*Loewen\_maeulchen* (German “snapdragon,” but literally “small lion’s mouth”) similarly incorporates two meaning layers that both connect to the forum. On one hand, a plant’s name is not unusual in the forum as denoting nature, as for instance in *marienblume* (German “daisy”). On the other hand, the *maeulchen* (German “small mouth”) has a tongue-in-cheek connotation with regard to eating disorders. A lion’s mouth could be characterized as typical of an obese person, but the fact that it is a small lion’s mouth may rather point in the direction of restrained eating behavior, as in anorexia.

### Famous Referents

Almost half of the proper names in the corpus have famous or well-known referents (see Table 3). This is noteworthy, since in the forum rules it is stated that nicknames may not be identical to the name of another person, institution, or registered brand. Taken literally, any commonly known name would be forbidden on the basis of this rule, but it appears that this rule is not always followed. It seems that participants do try to get through nicknames with well-known referents, and they sometimes succeed. However, since the rejection of nicknames on the basis of this rule is common, names of actresses, super models, pop singers, etc. are largely absent. *Brooke*, with its referent a figure from the soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* and/or the actress Brooke Shields, is an exception, probably because it has more than one famous referent.

Certain names with non-living or “unreal” referents appear to be tolerated. These include names of historical or mythical figures (e.g., *hypathia*, *Kassiopaiah*, *Anthea*, *Nikolaus*), well known personae from literary works, visual art, theater, or music (for example *Rusalka*, a famous opera by Antonin Dvorak, *Mona Lisa*, and *Salome*), and names of contemporary cartoon figures or film characters (e.g., *Schuenga*—a character in the German version of the movie *Nell*, *schnoopy*—a cartoon character dog, and *Dorie*—a cartoon character in the movie *Finding Nemo*). Each of these names, when read as an emblem, projects specific attributes of the referent of the name onto the participant who registered the name. For example, *hypathia* refers to a Greek female mathematician and philosopher and may be read as an emblem of wisdom and intelligence. *Hypathia* is also the name of a journal of feminist philosophy, however, which renders the name a feminist emblem. *Schuenga* is a pet form of the word *Schutzengel* (German “guardian angel”) and invokes not only the reading of being a guardian angel, but also the *wish* for a guardian angel. In general, names of Greek goddesses or historical persons are common. Attributes stereotypically related to Greek and other mythical or historical figures are dignified, gracious, beautiful, and intelligent.

As with “nature” nicknames, smallness as a characteristic attribute extends over the domains of both denotation and famous referents. Famous names with “small” referents include the cartoon figures, but also *lillifee79*, which refers to *Lillifee*, a small play figure for girls who takes special care of animals. Even one commonly known proper name has a diminutive, namely *Windjulchen*, composed of German “wind”

**Table 3** Examples of famous referent nicknames

Contemporary	Historical
Dorie (cartoon figure)	Salome (daughter of Herodias)
Brooke (figure in soap opera)	Aletheia (goddess of truth)
lillifee79 (play figure for girls)	Anthea (epithet of Hera)
Pinkpanther (cartoon figure)	hypathia (mathematician and philosopher)

and the name *Julie* with diminutive *-chen*. Apparently, smallness is characteristic of many HO participants.

### Noticeable Persona Attributes

Grouping the nicknames' persona attributions reveals that some persona attributes seem to occur frequently in the corpus: femininity, childishness, depression, distinctiveness, and self-confidence. Femininity, as in femaleness, can be constructed through gender-coded emblems such as in *Ms.Dust*, since *Ms.* is coded as referring to a female. Additionally, however, certain stereotypical social images of femininity can be discerned in nicknames. With regard to persona display through stereotypes, it appears that femininity is displayed in at least three variants: nature femininity, childish femininity, and noble femininity. The Greek female referents are rather gracious, noble women, whereas the contemporary female cartoon/play figures construct a childish kind of femininity, which is characterized by sweetness and cuteness. The absence of prototypical emblems of the sort of femininity related to beauty or attractiveness must probably not be mistaken for a disinterest on the part of HO participants; these nicknames were most likely rejected by the forum moderators.

The attribute childish is in the context of HO a certain type of femininity, with emphasis on immature age. Nicknames such as *Kitekati* (cf. English "kitty cat"), *Daisymaus* (English/German "daisy mouse") and *baerli* (German "small bear") are childish and accordingly, as argued above, stereotypically feminine. Women have frequently been characterized as childish (e.g., Friedan, 1963). Also, women are more likely to be addressed as girls than men are to be addressed as boys (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). For this reason, in the current analysis, the attributes childish and feminine are assumed to overlap to a considerable extent.

The attribute depression or being down can be read from many nicknames, both in nature nicks and other nicknames. *Blue Guy* and *Masnie* (no denotation) read reversed as *einsam* (German "lonely") ascribe to its referent the persona attribute 'depressed.'

The attribute 'distinctive' expresses the characteristic of being special or exceptional in a positive sense. This is not to be equated with creativity, since creativity is to a certain extent required for choosing or constructing any nickname. The reason for this is that many nicks have been registered already (each nickname can be used in the forum only once), and also that nicknames may not be identical to the name of another person, institution, or registered brand. Distinctiveness is more than creativity; it is related to exclusiveness, refinement, and dignity. For example, in HO a Spanish nickname such as *tortuga* ("turtle") displays greater distinctiveness than the German equivalent would do. Thus, distinctive in the present analysis is meant as original, for instance, in choice of language. Novel formations can also be read as distinctive, as can names of certain famous referents.

Self-confidence can be read as a persona attribute in a few cases. The nickname *quorkepf* was mentioned previously, but also *krats*, when read as a reversal of *stark* (German "strong"), seems to construct self-confidence or strength. Further, *\*Vivo\**

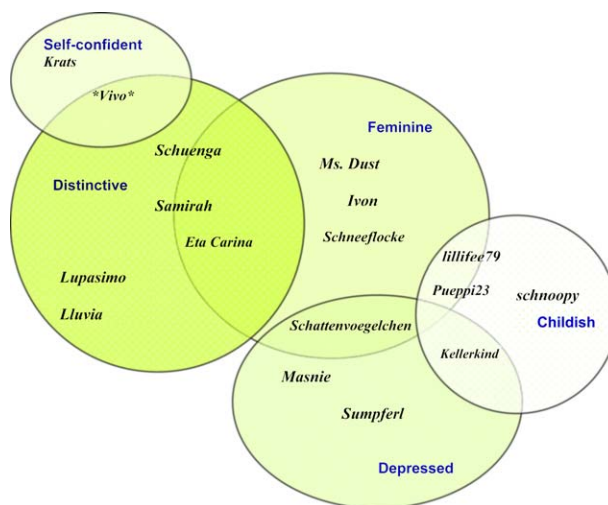
(Italian “I live”) can be claimed to be positive when read as “I am happy to live!” However, all of these cases could also be read as emblematic of the opposite. \*Vivo\* may also be read as “I am barely still alive.” Additionally, since “stark” and “Querkopf” have been modified (i.e., the *e* and *o* are swapped in *quorkepf*, and the word is completely reversed in *krats*), the self-confidence is disputable, maybe modified or obscured.

The recurring persona attributes that nicknames as emblems convey (through both grammatical aspects and stereotypical projections) can be visualized as circles that overlap (Figure 1). One nickname can be a sign of various attributes, depending on how the nickname is read. *Kellerkind* has been argued to be both down and childish, *Schattenvoegelchen* both down and feminine, etc.

### Linking Nicknames to Eating Disorders

When nicknames are read as actor-focal emblems, the categories of personhood or attributes presented above must (since they occur in a specific context) be related to the HO forum as such. This raises the question: Do the identities that have been read from the nicknames relate to what is written about eating disorders? And if so, in what sense?

The nicknames that denote lightness or weightlessness are congruent with the anorectic’s and bulimic’s fear of taking up space in the world and the ideal of thinness or even weightlessness (Bruch, 2001). Bigness, fatness, and heaviness do not appear in nicknames.<sup>7</sup> Orbach (2001) notes that as the body has come to represent the existence and insistence of needs, the anorectic develops the wish to do away with the body or exist without a body at all. Nicknames such as *Estrella1981*



**Figure 1** Persona attributes in nicknames

(Spanish “star”), *cielo* (Italian/Spanish “sky”/ “heaven”), \**Schneeflocke*\* (German “snow flake”), and *Lluvia* (Spanish “rain”) seem to reflect the ideal of weightlessness.

Closely related are the nicknames that denote smallness, such as small animals and plants. These have been analyzed primarily as childish and feminine, but smallness may be expected to be similar to weightlessness. Orbach (2001) explains the relation between fat, need, and smallness:

Fat has come to stand for need, greed, indulgence, wantonness, unruliness, a loss of control, an unstoppability. Fatness represents folds and folds of uncontrollable needs and the guilt associated with the satisfaction of such needs. Fat represents the *exposure* of need. The ability to make herself smaller and smaller is the direct expression of the anorectic’s success in controlling such needs and neediness. (p. 91, italics in original)

Being like a child can also be related to the wish not to become or be mature. A girl’s first menstruation can be a negative experience. It may be experienced as a loss of control, or worse, the body becoming “out of control.” Orbach (2001, p.132) recounts that an 11-year old was explained that her menstruation had started so early because she was a “big girl.” In reaction to that, the girl resolved to become a smaller girl through a strict diet, which then made her period not reappear for many years. This attempt to control the body has been described with the term “desexualizing” the female body. Through diminishing hips and breasts, and banishing her period, a girl denies essential aspects of adult femininity. Perhaps because of the rule that inhibits nicknames with an offensive, mistakable, insinuating, or acrimonious character, only two nicks seem to display stereotypically feminine features or commodities related to beauty or attractiveness: *lillifee79* and *la careta* (Spanish “make up”). Whereas in a forum for teenagers in the U.S., many sexual nicknames were found by Subrahmanyam et al. (2004), there are no sexually-colored nicks at all, even though at least part of the HO population belongs to the same age group. Avoiding sexuality has been claimed to be quite usual for eating-disordered women (Treasure et al., 2005). Sexually-colored nicks may therefore be treated as offensive or acrimonious and rejected as inappropriate for the forum on these grounds.

Childish/feminine nicknames are only one kind of nickname and also only one perspective on eating disorders. Anorexia is not just a disorder of puberty, an attempt to stay a girl, or a denial of femininity. Orbach (2001) claimed that the anorectic woman is not just weak and childish, but also “a crafty, strong and unyielding opponent” in the struggle for power over who is in control over the individual woman’s body (p. 4). This strength can be read in distinctive, dignified nicks such as *Kassiopaiah*, *Freya*, and *Aletheia*. These noble female Greek figures do not subscribe to the image of a child-like, small, or weightless being. However, the famous referents, mostly goddesses, artistic personae, or women of great stature, could also be seen as exemplary of the high expectations sufferers have of themselves or the goals they set themselves: to become persons with high status and records of

achievements. In other words, these nicks seem to symbolize aspirations rather than descriptions of current reality.

The self-confident nicknames *quorkepf* and *krats* do not reflect childishness, either. However, the modifications, as discussed above, are noteworthy. A possible explanation is that the HO forum is approached by participants as a social community where a manifestation of strength is not appropriate. It has been noted that girls suffering from anorexia “struggle with the challenge to claim their strengths without ‘sounding like a bitch/a snob/stuck up’” (Bruch, 2001, p. xvi). However, whether this is the explanation for the modifications in these names remains speculative.

Negative self-evaluation, which is mentioned as an important symptom in eating disorders, may be identified in nicknames such as *Pueppi23*, *Ampelweibchen*, and *Kellerkind*. Adopting a nickname which is either an emblem for a silly, over-styled woman, or a person who constantly changes her mind, together with references to oneself as a “child,” implies a critical evaluation of the self or lack of self-esteem. The words *Pueppi* and *weibchen*, which explicitly denote women, are both derogatory.

The persona attribute of being down or depressed may be linked to the comorbidity of eating disorders and depression (Fornari, Sandberg, Matthews, Skolnick, & Katz, 1992). Orbach relates depression to self-hate, the term she prefers to describe eating disordered persons’ low self-esteem. “Self hate is debilitating. Anyone who suffers it will do almost anything to disguise it. They may turn into depression...” (Orbach, 2001, p. 112). It must be stressed, however, that nicknames which convey the attribute depression are very few in this sample, possibly because these are rejected by the HO moderators or because depressed persons were less likely to respond to the call for participation in the study.

The great variety of languages and the effect of a non-German nickname as being different, distinctive, or even dignified may be linked to the desire to be unlike everyone else, a dream to be special, which is recognized in many sufferers (Bruch, 2001). The multilingualism in nicknames may also be a sign of globalization, not in the sense of the English-speaking “global village” or one dominant world culture (Bechar-Israeli, 1995), but as a reflection of participants’ awareness of, and openness towards, other languages and cultures. Alternatively, the fact that the interaction in the forum is exclusively in German suggests rather an interpretation of the richness of languages in nicks as a means to render the online persona special or exotic.

## Discussion

These findings demonstrate how when nicknames are read as emblems they characterize their referents. Recurring persona attributes are smallness, weightlessness (snow, wind, star, etc.), childishness (e.g., cartoon figures), and depression or negative self-evaluation, but also noble femininity (names from Greek goddesses and historical persons). Many of these attributes are traditionally associated with femininity, which reveals how nicknames can be gendered in a non-apparent, largely metaphorical manner. Many of the persona attributes in nicks have been argued to

be plausibly related to eating disorders, which indicates that nicknames are important elements with regard to gender and identity, perhaps *especially* in contexts where identity is highly relevant (e.g., eating disorders).

Mapping nicknames and persona attributes of eating disordered persons is not intended to essentialize aspects of the self or personhood of individuals suffering from a very severe illness; rather, it is an attempt to understand the role nicknames play in online identity construction. It appears that nicknames should not only be considered as medium-specific linguistic forms, but as signs that derive signification from their context. This means that it would be inaccurate to advance typologies of nicknames irrespective of the online context.

Further, the study raises questions about forum policy regarding the constitution of nicknames. It has been demonstrated that despite forum rules, participants register nicknames which can be read as conveying various attributes of personhood, and which thus construct online personae. The role of the self has been argued to be crucial in eating disorders, which is also underscored by the fact that HO participants express the personal relevance or importance of their nickname in forum interactions. One participant emphasized that if she got better at some point, she would need a new nickname. Since the forum aims at defeating eating disorders, it can be argued that sufferers, in the process of recovery, should have the possibility to change their nicknames. When *Sumpferl* (German “small marsh”) is doing better and feels more optimistic, she is likely to prefer a more positive nick. A personal history of nicknames could avoid problems recognizing HO participants. Therefore, the possibility of nick change should be (re)considered.

## Conclusions

Limitations of this study include the relatively small number of nicknames used for analysis and the fact that only a single context was investigated, especially since it has been argued that the context should affect the interpretation of nicknames and how they function to construct identity. Further, the method of data collection, although ethically sound, is problematic. For example, a call for participation and consent may be answered by those who are particularly proud of their nickname, resulting in a biased sample. Another limitation is that the nicknames could not be related to the participants’ forum contributions.

A wider implication of this type of study is that nicknames should be included in analyses of social phenomena in web-based communication, since their identity-relevant quality matters to participants. This means that nicknames should not only be analyzed for apparent gender construction, but additionally for how, depending on their context, they construct other persona attributes.

For future research, it is highly recommended to include participants’ readings of nicknames. This would require an arrangement with forum coordinators to allow the researcher to approach participants. Although nicknames from web-based communities with less sensitive populations (which are more easily approachable) should

also be studied, it would be unfortunate to restrict data collection and analysis to non-sensitive communities. The reason for this is that in sensitive populations nicknames might play an especially important role with respect to identity. A restriction could thus affect research understanding of nicknames. Nonetheless, ethical concerns should not be neglected. Provided that protection of participants is guaranteed, research can also help to optimize web-based services, such as forums, for sensitive groups.

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## Notes

- 1 The concept of “self” is used here as a synonym for identity (as is done frequently; see, e.g., Bordo, 1993, p. 290). The concept is frequently invoked in the psychological literature on eating disorders, for example, in terms of “negative self evaluation” and “self-acceptance” (Treasure et al., 2005).
- 2 This analysis of nicknames from the *Hungrig-Online* forum is not concerned with whether users construct their “real” gender through their nickname choice.
- 3 For an explanation of the concept of “register,” see Agha (2007, chapters 2 and 3).
- 4 This recalls the “babyiness” of small animals (Lorenz, 1943), which means that humans perceive small animals that share certain physical features with human babies (such as large head and eyes) as cute and sweet.
- 5 In the HO forum, the name of a famous person does not refer to the (famous) unique referent, but to an HO member. As a consequence, the name must be seen as an emblem, intended to be read as such by other forum participants. In this way, stereotypical attributes of the famous referent are projected onto the HO participant.
- 6 The reason for not using the grammatical terms “proper nouns” vs. “common nouns” in this article is that in fact all nicknames are proper nouns. However, a distinction is needed between nicknames that are already known as names (commonly known names), and nicknames that either are possible but unattested names (novel formations) or are made up of nouns or other linguistic forms (all other word types than names).
- 7 One exception to avoiding connotations of bigness may be the nickname *Eta Carina*, which is the name of one of the most massive stars (see <http://etacar.umn.edu/etainfo/>). However, seen from the earth with the naked eye, any star is just a shiny dot in the sky, which at least puts its heaviness and bigness into perspective. Further, the distinctive character of this nickname (for it is very original) and the likeliness that HO participants do not know its original referent (i.e., the specific star) do not render this potential exception very significant.

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## About the Author

Wyke Stommel is a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology and a member of the interdisciplinary gender research training group at the University of Frankfurt. Her research interests include online identity and online community, and conversation analytical approaches to health-related online interaction.

**Address:** Cornelia Goethe Centrum /JWG-Universität Frankfurt am Main, Fach 107, 60054 Frankfurt/Main, Germany [Stommel@soz.uni-frankfurt.de]