The empirical focus of my PhD-research project is the Hungrig-Online-forum, the largest German forum on eating disorders, where exchange and support in defeating the disorder can be seen as participants’ common goal. Apart from weight concern and motivated eating restraint, a lack of self worthiness is frequently described as an important symptom of eating disorders. The central question is how in this online community selves are constructed. From a post-structuralist perspective, my paper will argue that, amongst other practices, nicknames in this online forum are identity constructions that constitute participants as selves or subjects with eating disorders. Feminist explanations of eating disorders stress that the problem of self-effacement is entangled with the feminine self. This raises questions on the role of gender in eating disorders and if and how gender is acted out in an online community such as Hungrig-Online. In this paper, I focus on nicknames as self and gender constructing phenomena, which is supported by the fact that names are “not simply a useful label, but a repository of accumulated meanings, practices, and beliefs, a powerful linguistic means of asserting identity (or defining someone else) and inhabiting a social world” (Rymes 2001:159).

Participants affirm the importance of their nicks. The statement “if I would change my nickname, it would feel as if I would give up part of myself”\(^1\) underlines the self-constitutive power of nicknames, whereas another participant confides in the forum: “When I feel well, I am irritated by my nick, but apart from that it fits”.\(^2\) Hereby, she displays different states of the self and the appropriateness of the nick for the negative state.

An analysis of 83 nicknames from this forum will be presented. Some examples of nicknames are: Kassiopaiah, song_bird, Schattenvoegelchen, Schnoopy, *+*SaLTaTriX_NiViS*+* and quorkepf. A grammatical analysis will yield insight in the types of words that are used as nicknames (first names, common nouns, adjectives etc.) and the subsequent potential for gender (grammatical and lexical gender, Hellinger and Bußmann 2001). Whereas gender is the category that normally always finds construction in first names (Oelkers, 2004), this appears not to be the case for nicknames. Additionally, semantic/semiotic layers of meaning in these nicknames will be analysed. Semantically, frequently used categories are flora and fauna, meteorology/astrology and media and

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\(^1\) For anonymity reasons, quotes from the forum are not assigned to their author. In the seeking of consent for the analysis of nicknames, it has been agreed with the forum administrators, the association Hungrig-Online, that nicknames will not be published in relation to utterances.

\(^2\) Idem.
historical figures. Umbrella terms such as femininity, childishness, and distinction cover many nicknames’ connotations.

In my presentation, I will further discuss the extent to which typical characteristics of eating disorders accord with the online selves constructed through various features of their nicknames. Evidently, although nicknames are strictly speaking “not more than” a formal requirement for internet participation, they are crucial vehicles for virtual self construction, which can be a delicate matter for sufferers of, for example, eating disorders.

