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Narratives of Infertile Muslim Women: The Construction of Personal and Socio-Cultural
Identities in Weblogs

By Fatema S Alhalwachi

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Birkbeck, University of London

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Abstract

Based within a social constructionist paradigm and anchored on constitutive studies of research on identity within sociolinguistics and communication studies, this thesis uses a context based, socially oriented small story narrative analysis approach (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) and positioning theory (Bamberg 2007; Davis and Harré 1991), to explore the ‘how’ of identity construction in the personal narratives of infertile Muslim women. It investigates the social, cultural, religious and personal influences that emerge from and contribute to the various discursive constructions and negotiations of ‘self’ in stories women tell about their experiences. The study identifies claims and negotiations of identity in a selection of personal weblogs at both a ‘micro’ lexico-grammatical level, and ‘macro’ semantic level, addressing how these negotiations are achieved. It analyses how tellers orient to past and present selves; position self-other in the interaction; and orient to ‘master narratives’ relevant to their identity claims. Given that the issue of infertility in Muslim women has long been considered taboo and difficult to study, this thesis is novel in two respects: in ‘giving voice’ to what is typically an inaccessible and ‘silent’ minority; and more specifically in applying small story analysis to discuss the positioning acts of a group of vulnerable women communicating via weblogs, contributing to an understanding of how infertile Muslim women construct and manage their sense of self and how they use narratives as spaces of identity creation, performance and negotiation.

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I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this research project is entirely my own.

Fatema Alhalwachi

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Chapter I: Introduction

1.0 The Case for Investigating the Identity of Infertile Muslim Women

'I will never accept that certain people have been chosen to have children, any more than "infertiles" are chosen to be deprived of them. If you insist that this is God, then I reject your God, instead turning to mine—a source I opt to rely on in order to weather hardships' (Layla, Beyond What If's, posted April 2014).

'Infertility' is a term used medically to describe the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse (Zegers-Hochschild & de Mouzon et al. 2009). It is without doubt a serious problem that influences most if not all aspects of a couple's lives. In Muslim cultures, where a woman's worth is still arguably measured predominantly by her ability to bear children (Inhorn 1996; Tahiri et al. 2015)¹, the effects of infertility on a woman's identity become paramount.

Recent theorisations of identity assert that an understanding of subjectivity requires an appreciation of the external factors that constrain and shape 'the self' (Benwell & Stokoe 2006). Within the field of sociolinguistics and within discourse studies more generally, research has focussed on the process of identity formation and representation. This research has pointed to the significance of powerful discourses on identity formation and representation. (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; McEntee-Atalianis 2019). As such, it is proposed that a linguistic, and more specifically narrative inquiry, into the formation of gender, sexual, and other identities by those experiencing infertility may reveal the normative

¹ Although childbearing is encouraged and emphasised in Islamic teachings, motherhood is a mandatory social expectation in Muslim cultures and not an essential part of womanhood in Islamic theology and law. In fact, 'womanhood' in Islamic scholarship is not necessarily compromised by a woman's infertility (Chaudhry, 2010).

boundaries/discourses/forces that serve to regulate individual's 'sense of self', whilst at the same time reveal areas of resistance and change.

This study seeks to investigate the effect of infertility and associated cultural/ideological forces have on infertile Muslim women. It argues for the value of a culture-specific linguistic investigation of identity in relation to infertility and seeks to explain how the particularities of the Muslim context present added challenges to the formation of infertile subjectivities, ultimately demanding an investigation that highlights the tensions involved in their discursive construction.

This study builds upon existing literature within narrative studies (Bamberg 1997; 2005, 2007; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008; Georgakopoulou 2008). It investigates the way Muslim women with infertility problems construct a sense of self and perform their various identities in stories about themselves; linking these to wider social and cultural contexts. Such stories are however hard to find. The dominant cultural and religious construction of Muslim women's sexual embodiment means that discussions around infertility are limited and confined to private spaces. First-hand accounts of experiences of infertile Muslim women are limited to private interactions within close medical and social spaces and are affected (to varying extents) by patriarchal and religious discourses in contexts to which these women belong. However, some Muslim women with fertility problems have resorted to the Internet to share their experiences. The narratives they write on social media websites provide exceptional spaces in which they candidly discuss their experiences of trying to conceive and undergo fertility treatment, as well as relevant aspects of their personal and social lives (see Chapter Three for a more comprehensive discussion of this).

The data for this study are therefore comprised of narratives published by infertile Muslim women on personal weblogs dedicated to the issue of infertility. The salience of investigating these particular narratives is that they compose 'uncensored' outlets in which

the authors can challenge social constructions and restrictions (Bronstein 2015; Wells 2010).

In this sense, narratives can be used to confront socially-circulating discourses about infertility and the socially expected expectations/roles of Muslim women in relation to procreation and womanhood. Further, online self-presentations integrate various kinds of personal information such as private thoughts and social behaviours, all of which contain information about identity (Ambady & Skowronski 2008; Back et al. 2010; Funder 1999; Hall & Bernieri 2001; Kenny 1994).

1.2 Thesis Aims and Objectives

The main aim of this study is to contribute to the existing body of sociolinguistic literature on discourse, identity, and gender by taking forward discourse-analytical investigations of identity in interaction, most notably by Bamberg (1997) and Georgakopoulou (2008), in an effort to look at identity construction and negotiation in written narratives of infertility in blogs. The study is novel in its application of small-story analysis (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) to an exploration of subjective and intersubjective ‘positioning’ acts in the examination of identity formation and performance by Muslim women who are experiencing infertility. The study shows how identity work is achieved through orientation to the self; to others in the telling of the story; and to relevant/available sociocultural, religious, and medical discourses around infertility, whilst actively and agentively selecting, resisting, and revisiting positions and discourses. The study aims to scrutinise ‘the inconsistencies, contradictions, and moments of trouble and tension and the teller’s constant navigation and finessing between different versions of selfhood and identity’ (Bamberg 2012: 31). It investigates tensions expressed in momentary negotiation and performance of gender and sexual identities in narrative tellings. It traces individuals’ discursive and linguistic moves, seeking to provide an answer to the question of ‘who am I?’ (Bamberg 1997). The

present study highlights the dynamic between identities and discourses, investigating how infertile Muslim women create, manage, negotiate, and transform their various selves (in relation to infertility) and manage the different and often contradictory positions presented by themselves and others in an attempt to project a constant and more stable sense of self. It also looks into the dynamics of constructing/maintaining the identity of the online infertile blogging community itself.

This thesis also aims to give voice to an under-researched and under-represented group by highlighting some of the cultural and social challenges that they face in constructing their various selves as women in the face of denied motherhood.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured in the following way: As seen above, chapter one establishes the case for investigating Muslim women's identity and explains the aims, objectives and structure of the study. Chapter two first reviews the literature on identity, social constructionism, narrative approaches, and the narrative turn towards exploring small stories. Then, it surveys the literature on gender and sexual identity, and Muslim culture/identity. Further, evaluations of social media as a space for narrative and identity work are explored in relation to theoretical perspectives. The chapter presents necessary contextual and theoretical information in order to discuss what constitutes Muslim identity and how/why infertility is a social problem worth exploring, setting out the rationale and aims for presenting the research questions. The third chapter presents the methodological and analytic background to the study and. Chapters four to six explore how Muslim infertile identities are constructed at the beginning, middle and final stages of their infertility journey. The seventh and final chapter discusses the findings, implications, and limitations of this research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter explores salient literature on postmodern approaches to identity, including subaltern identities in narrative and in social media outlets. The first section begins by discussing discursive approaches to identity and the rise of narrative approaches; this is followed by a focused account of small-story analysis and positioning theory. The second section reviews identity construction in social media outlets, with special attention paid to studies on the blogosphere. The review then surveys current sociolinguistic investigations of identity construction of subaltern groups, including sex and gender identity and the identity of Muslim women. Through presenting social media as an outlet for identity work, the review argues that Muslim women are turning towards social media as an outlet for self-presentation. The last section investigates infertility studies and discusses the sociocultural and religious particularities of the Muslim contexts of marriage, procreation, and the ability to conceive, looking at their impact on Muslim's women's subjectivity. The chapter ends by stating the research questions, followed by a summary.

2.1 The Late Modern Approach to Identity

Identity may be defined as the answer to the questions of 'who am I?' and/or 'who are we to each other?' (Bamberg 2010). For a long time, theorists argued for the essentiality or fixity of identity, wherein the subject's identity is viewed as an 'essential' and instrumental 'project of the self'. Theorists sought to establish universal laws of psychology or social structure to explain the essence of self, arguing for a persistent sense of self that is bound by psychological and social forces (see Benwell & Stokoe 2006). Ideas formed by the structuralist school of thought viewed identity as 'rooted in elements of the social structure,

such as in roles; networks; and broader social categories including social class, ethnicity, and nationality' (Snow et al. 2005: 391), or in biological characteristics such as age, race, and sex. However, inspired by socio-political, economic, and technological advances at the turn of the 21st century, philosophical and sociological theorists, such as Castells, Giddens, Hall, and feminist poststructuralists such as Weedon (Block 2006), challenged essentialist viewpoints, arguing for a need for a more contemporary understanding of identity that accounts for the fragmented, fluid, and non-conforming modern individual. This led to a shift in the conceptualization of identity away from structuralism towards post-structuralism. Instead current 'late/post'-modern accounts have come to conceive the self by its position in social practice, arguing for an understanding of identity as a discursive and lived experience (Benwell & Stokoe 2006; Block 2006; McEntee-Atalianis 2019). They conceptualise identity as a process, a project of 'becoming' (McEntee-Atalianis 2019: 10), that is enacted by individuals through a contextually and socially contingent intersection of multiple selves in interaction.

Within this frame, investigations of the discursive 'performance' of identity view language and interaction as the main sites of identity work. Social psychologists such as Goffman (1959) and social and cultural theorists including Hall (1990), Bhabha (1990; 1994; 1996), and Butler (1990; 1997) have emphasised the role of social interaction and social practice in identity construction (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). They interpret identity through a recognition of subjectivity as an emergent, socioculturally and sociohistorically discursive, multifaceted, and contingent concept that is constituted in discourse.

Butler's theory of performativity (1990) has been particularly influential. She argues that gender and sexual identity are not fixed or binary. Rather, they take on social meaning within culturally, historically, and contextually situated sites of power, where they are constantly negotiated and subjected to the agentive acts of the individual (McEntee-Atalianis

2019). Individuals' performance of gender (and sexual) identities, according to Butler, are subjected to cultural regulations and norms of appropriateness that work to reinforce those performances through repetition (see section 2.5 for further discussion). Accordingly, what it means to be a woman in one context or point in time will not be the same as that in another context or point in time. Individuals are perceived as *subjects* or products of linguistic practices and contexts or discursive fields, occupying and hence constituting different subject positions based on their context. Their actions and behaviours in those subject positions constitute the discursive field itself, i.e., they come to define what 'womanhood' entails. There are, therefore, no predetermined identities or qualities tied to an individual. Identity thus becomes 'a discursive practice' formed through linguistic and social interpretations and interactions, and positioned, according to Hall and Butler, in relation to powerful ideological discourses that constitute particular subjectivities (e.g., culturally defined gender, religious, national, or ethnic identities).

It is worth pointing out here that not all postmodern theorists take on an anti-essentialist stance—that is, a rejection of the notion of the fixity of core identities in its entirety. Theorists such as Gee (1999) make a distinction between identities and subjectivities. Gee (1999) argues that whilst identities are relatively stable, subjectivities are made in moment-to-moment interactions, emerging as individuals engage in activities of all types (Bucholtz & Hall 2005; Block 2013). This distinction includes 'socially situated' identities, as in the multiple identities we take on in different practices and contexts, and 'core' ones, or 'whatever continuous and relatively 'fixed' sense of self underlies our continually shifting multiple identities' (p.39). This definition points to the relevance of considering essential categories in the understanding of identity construction. To this end, Joseph (2004) argues that any identity-construction process 'depends for its operation on a widespread belief in the essentialism of identities' (p.90).

The emphasis on the centrality of language and interaction as sites of identity work - as

sites where identity is discursively performed, constituted, constructed, and positioned - has directed the 'discursive paradigm' in contemporary research on identity in the social sciences or what is widely referred to as the 'discursive' turn (McEntee-Atalianis 2019). Approaches and trends within this discursive turn are discussed below.

2.2 Investigating Identity through Language

The discursive turn toward the study of identity is based on two main assumptions that arise from the grand theories of discourse outlined above: that language 'constructs' reality, and that meaning is an emergent property of relations (Carter 2013). Researchers adopting these assumptions view identity as 'a learning process with its pasts and future incorporating the present' (Wenger 1998: 163). It is 'never unified and [...] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiple, constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices, and positions' (Hall 2000: 17). The main methodological problem for researchers is thus to describe the process or mechanism by which identities are discursively produced or performed, in a way that is compatible with postmodern conceptions of fluid and shifting identity, in order to ultimately describe the ontological grounds of a world created through interaction (Mease 2017).

Whilst agreeing in terms of their ontological standing, scholars in this area employ an array of analytic methods and theoretical perspectives to interrogate subjectivity as discursively performed in discourse. For instance, some methods employ micro-level tools of analysis such as ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, membership analysis, and discursive psychology. The focus of these approaches is placed on 'small-d' discourse processes (*d*iscourse) or 'discursive practices' (Bamberg et al. 2011: 180; Gee 1999; Holstein & Gubrium 2000) through which a 'bottom-up' detailed turn-by-turn examination is undertaken of specific instances of language-in-use (Benwell & Stokoe 2006; McEntee-Atalianis 2019). This approach aims at revealing elements of

identity that are informed by *discourses* of the ‘local in-situ contexts within which subjects ‘find themselves speaking’ (Bamberg et al. 2011: 181). As such, identities are seen as emerging from indexical devices that speakers use to make sense of the context in which they are placed, and to cue listeners interactively towards the intended communicative goal (Bamberg et al., 2011).

Macro-level investigations of identity in discourse on the other hand, such as narrative analysis, positioning theory, and critical discourse analysis, place their focus on investigating ‘capital-D’ discourse processes (*Discourses*) or ‘discourses-in-practice’ (Benwell & Stokoe 2006). *Discourses*, refer to those wider frameworks or dominant discourses, described elsewhere as ‘cultural models’ (Holland & Skinner, 1987); ‘interpretive repertoires’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987); and ‘master narratives’ (Lyotard, 1984). These definitions vary in scope. In this thesis, the term ‘D-discourses’ is distinguished with an italicized capital ‘D’, and adopts Gee’s understanding of the term as the ways in which people enact and recognize socially and historically significant identities or “kinds of people” through well-integrated combinations of language, actions, interactions, objects, tools, technologies, beliefs, and values’ (Gee 2015). It views language used amongst people as a form of ‘conversation’, or socially accepted associations among different historically formed *Discourses*. These *Discourses* are of social and historical significance to kinds of people or social groups, presented (among ways of using language) expressions ‘of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network”’ (Gee 1996: 131). *Discourses* in this sense can be thought of as ‘identity kits’ (Gee 1996, 2001; Knobel 1999), in which people share ‘everyday theories about the world’, including what is considered ‘common sense’, and what is typical or normal ‘appropriate’ from the perspective of a particular *Discourse* (D’Andrade & Strauss 1992; Gee, 1999). ‘Master narratives’ on the other hand, although used interchangeably with *Discourses* in many instances, point specifically to what Tannen defines as the culture-wide ideologies and sociocultural assumptions (culturally recognised

discourses or shared repertoires) shaping the big N-narratives and forming ‘a canopy over the discourse’ (e.g. pre-existent socio-cultural forms of interpretation such as those of masculinity, procreation after marriage, ideal mothering, etc.) (Tannen 2008: 210).

Researchers working on macro-level investigations follow a ‘top-down’ approach through text to uncover discursive and linguistic representations of social discourses and the ideologies underlying identity constructions (e.g. Fairclough 1995). They view *Discourses* as the ‘dominant organising factor and the means through which identities are produced’ (Widdicombe 1998: 199). They look at the way in which ‘forms of life’ or ‘thought systems’ are called upon in discourse, as individuals choose from ‘an array of existing patterns of action’ that are available to them from their particular cultural context (Bamberg et al. 2011: 180). As a result, links ‘between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture’ are revealed (Foucault 1985: 3 cited in Bamberg et al. 2011: 196). These macro- and micro-level approaches focus on the analysis of various social and cultural identities. They investigate specific identity categories such as gender (Sunderland & Litosseliti 2002; Litosseliti 2006a), sexuality (Bucholtz & Hall 2004a; 2004b; Milani 2013), age (Coupland 2009; Kaufman & Elder 2002; Murphy 2010; Williams & Nussbaum 2013), or ethnic and national identities (De Fina 2003; De Fina 2012; Fearon & Laitin 2000); or choose to focus on particular settings, such as how identity is managed and constituted within the discourses of power and relations within a given institutional environment (Freeman & Brett 2007; Hester & Housley 2017; Thornborrow 2014).

More recently, some social psychologists who appropriate narrative analysis ‘NA’ and positioning theory ‘PT’ (e.g. Antaki 1994; Potter 1996; Wetherell 1998) have suggested that identity can best be captured through a blend of both micro- and macro-levels of analysis that attend to both small-d and capital-D discourses. Positioning theory, for example, investigates the connections between macro discourses and micro levels of interaction by examining the relationship between teller and audience and the relevant/available subject positions (Bamberg 2004; Davies & Harré

1990; Harré & van Langenhove 1999). Through a consideration of both the emic and etic, NA and PT propose an immanent and contextual focus to the analysis of personal experiences, one that utilises the performative properties of narratives (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg & McCabe 2000; Brockmeier & Carbaugh 2001; De Fina 2003; De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg 2006b; Bamberg, De Fina, & Schiffrin 2007; Bamberg et al. 2011; De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012, ch.6; Georgakopoulou 2007; Holler & Klepper 2013). This focus offers a promising way to study identity in narrative. Indeed, narratives are understood as a primary site of identity construction (Deppermann 2013), and a focus on this genre has created what is known as ‘the narrative turn’ in identity research, which forms the theoretical grounding to this thesis’s exploration of narratives by infertile Muslim women. For this, we now move to a more detailed discussion of NA and PT.

2.3 Narrative Approaches to the Study of Identity

2.3.1 Narrative inquiry.

Contemporary narrative inquiry adopts a constructionist understanding of discourse, or narrative, as constitutive of ‘reality’. This understanding informed the theoretical groundings of a large number of researchers in the late 1970s who developed new narrative approaches to understand history and humanity. Narrative inquiry is understood as research *with* narratives, by which researchers take on an ethnographic approach to eliciting understandings (Bamberg 2012). Towards a more discourse-based approach to narrative, many researchers have found merit in conducting research *on* narratives, placing the focus largely on the narrative construction from a variety of perspectives (Bamberg 2012). In this ‘turn’ to narrative analysis, researchers assert the fundamental role that narratives play in the constitution of the human self, seeing the telling of life stories as the locus for the creation of coherent identities (McAdams 1993; Polkinghorne 1988). Narrative theorists argue that we live in a ‘storytelling

society' through which we make sense of our lives and the events that happen in them (Denzin 2000), and that we construct our identities in narrative tellings, creating coherent and meaningful selves.

Early sociolinguistic work on the structure of narratives (e.g. Labov 1972; 1981; Labov & Waletzky 1967, Jefferson 1978) focused largely on oral narratives of personal experience. Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) analyses of oral narratives of experience, collected from interviews, emphasized the structural characteristics of narratives. They described narratives as discourse units that have a fairly regular textual structure, looking at them as well-formed stories that have a point (Shiffrin 2006). Their model shifted away from the dominating text-centered approaches of the 1980's, defining narratives as 'one verbal technique for recapitulating past experience, in particular a technique of constructing narrative units which match the temporal sequence of that experience' (Labov & Waletzky 1976: 13). Inspired by Labov and Waletzky's work, researchers appropriating interactionally oriented narrative analysis have devised a range of analytical tools to understand self-presentation in narratives. These were created to address what they saw as weaknesses in the Labovian model, especially its neglect of the interactional contexts in which narratives are performed. They saw that the exclusive focus on monologic narratives told in interview contexts was limiting and reductive, failing to account for the richness and complexity of narratives told in informal everyday talk and in formal/institutional contexts (De Fina & Johnstone 2015). In addition, many conversation analysts found insight in reconceptualising the 'evaluation' component of Labov's model², which proposes the idea of a 'secondary structure' in narrative (Labov 1972: 369 as cited in Hyland & Paltridge 2011). These researchers argue that is at the level of sentence grammar that we find our most direct clues

² Labov (1982) proposed a model of narrative inquiry that included a list of components of components (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and code).

to evaluation. Evaluation refers to the reason a particular narrative was being told, whether this reason was specifically stated or implied. Labov argues that ‘the evaluation of the narrative forms a secondary structure which is concentrated in the evaluation section but may be found in various forms throughout the narrative’ (Labov 1972: 369). According to Hyland and Paltridge, the ‘evaluation’ component of Labov’s model underlies most recent work on subjectivity, evaluation, and positioning in discourse. It is the ‘soul of the narrative’ (Riessman 1993: 21), expressing both the point of the story, and crucially, how the narrator wants to be understood, thus offering an analytical apparatus to see how evaluation is realized in a whole range of linguistic choices.

Research in the interactional framework generally relies on investigating canonical or ‘big’ narrative genres that comprise accounts of personal experiences obtained through interviewing or personal biographies. These approaches ascribe a particular ontological character to people as ‘storied selves’ (Benwell & Stokoe 2006), in which narrators work to convey positive and coherent selves by constructing their ‘current personas as a result of a series of connected developments’ (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012: 167; see also Clandinin & Connelly 2000; Clandinin 2006; Riessman 2003). People are believed to use narratives in assembling and integrating past and present happenings or constituted experiences, guided usually by projections and expectations of social, public, and cultural narratives available to them (e.g., see Hasford 2016).

Researchers working with interactionally oriented approaches to narrative have widely demonstrated the interconnected relationship between telling stories and building social identities (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg 2004; De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2011; Depperman 2013; De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012; Wortham 2000). For example, many studies have been dedicated to the analysis of self-presentation and self-expression in narratives. Schiffrin’s (1996) seminal paper ‘Narrative as Self-Portrait: Sociolinguistic Constructions of

Identity’, reveals how Jewish women display multiple self-presentations in stories they tell about their children’s partners. She explains how these women navigate between the story world and the moral positions they take in relation to their beliefs and convictions. Through an analysis of these self-presentations, Schiffrin was able to propose an interpretation of the process of identity construction and link this to more general social issues: such as the role of women within the family; and mainstream ideologies that support that role. Georgakopoulou (2002) examined the roles that family members play in narrative activities drawn from Greek families’ dinnertime conversations. She considered specifically how children are socialised into cultural understandings of narrative tellability and norms of self-presentation, through the narration of familiar, shared stories. Their narratives ‘convey powerful messages for culturally sanctioned roles and obligations for family members’, such as the proud and attentive mother (Georgakopoulou 2002: 49). Bamberg’s (2004) study of male identity performance in narratives involving a group of young boys shows how these boys collaborate in storytelling to create sophisticated versions of masculinity, working to create a positive self-presentation in front of the adult interviewer, whilst positioning themselves in relation to their friends through displays of ideal masculine hegemonic discourses. Similarly, Hasford (2016) studied the role of *Discourses of oppression* on the constitution of young black Canadians’ experiences at work. He stressed the role of direct or indirect audience involvement in self presentation in the narrative acts of young black Canadian employees. These studies show how narratives produced by people in social contexts offer effective ‘interpretive devices through which people represent themselves, both to themselves and to others’ (Lawler 2002: 242). They reveal how people use narrative to connect past and present self as created through shared social engagement with others. Studies by Davies and Harré (1990), Schiffrin (2006; 2010), and Georgakopoulou (2007; 2008) show that the storytelling activity and the positions selected and produced by the narrator reveal critical information

about an individual's personal and social identity. Although, unlike Shiffrin and Georgakopoulou, Davies and colleagues' analyses rely on made up examples rather than authentic social interaction, storytelling activities explored in the work of the abovementioned researchers are not only dependent and revealing in terms of the immediate context of production, but also render indices of stability and continuity over time. Narrative researchers argue that subtle shifts in narrative perspective, where tellers move selectively between the past, present, and future can be highly informative (Riessman 2003). An analysis of the acts of positioning involved in these narrative shifts, along with a consideration of word choice and structure of the narratives produced, reveal vital information about the narrator's identity.

Having provided some background on narrative analysis, the discussion now turns to a consideration of narratives in gender construction. Research on narratives in gender studies (e.g. Coates 1996, Doorduyn 2010, Ehlich 2015, Kyratzis 1999; 2000, Kiesling 2011, and Schleicher 2011a; 2011b, to name but a few) have shed light on many differences (and similarities) in male and female language use. For example, scholars have found differences in plot types, strategies, roles, and participation structures in narratives told by women and men (De Fina & Johnstone 2015; Johnstone 1993; 2015; Wodak 2015) and pointed to variations between genders with regard to storytelling style and content (Kyratzis 1999). Schleicher (2011b) identified differences between genders in the construction of identity narratives of success and failure, which highlighted the links between the local–interactional and social–discursive functions of participants' narratives.

Many studies have also examined the narratives of queer and socially sanctioned identities (Canakis 2015; Doorduyn 2010; Menard-Warwick 2007; Endo et al. 2010). For example, in one study, Doorduyn (2010) discussed the tensions that women with alternative sexual orientations experience as they try to accommodate to normative *Discourses* of gender

and sexuality. Endo and colleagues (2010) have also shown how homosexual teachers separate their sexual identity from their teacher identity in the stories they tell.

In addition to separation and differentiation in language use, many researchers look at similarity whilst others advocate a more inclusive investigation of the relationship between masculinity and femininity. The latter view appreciates the diversity, multiplicity and co-construction of gender identities within specific contexts, looking at how language users enact and produce new identities that assign new meanings to gender (For a demonstration of variability and similarity within and between gender categories, see Litosseliti's discussion 2006b, Ch 1-3).

In all cases, in relation to identity presentation, tellers' actions and intentionality are revealed through the way they mediate between the 'canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes' in their narratives (Bruner 1990: 52). Narrators/tellers actively structure their discursive activities in light of prescriptive norms and validations of self, by which they verbally locate themselves or 'position themselves' (Davies & Harré, 1990) against a backdrop of cultural expectations according to the way they wish to be understood, making shifts and changes to their identity along the way .

In summary, interactionist approaches to narrative present a unique 'linguistic lens through which to discover people's own (somewhat idealised) views of themselves as situated in a social structure' (Schiffrin 1996: 197). These approaches establish a link between narrative communication and self-presentation (Georgakopoulou 1997; Marwick & boyd 2011), focusing on how people enact and negotiate personal and social roles, relationships, and their memberships in specific communities (De Fina 2003: 19).

In recent years, another interactionally-oriented approach appeared, advocating for the investigation of 'small stories' rather than big canonical narratives (De Fina & Johnstone 2015; McEntee-Atalianis 2019). The small-story paradigm (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou

2008; Georgakopoulou 2007) presents a new narrative turn toward investigating under-represented narrative activities that are usually ignored by big-story analytical approaches. The focus on smallness is meant to emphasise the need for narrative analysts to sharpen their tools in order to be able to capture the variety of forms and functions that narratives display in different social-interactive contexts. This approach is elaborated on in the following section.

2.3.1 Small-story analysis.

Small-story analysis, an approach proposed by Bamberg (2004; 2005) and later taken up by others e.g. Georgakopoulou (2006; 2008) & Baynham & Georgakopoulou (2006), enables researchers to capture the shifts in self-presentation that occur during moment-to-moment interactions. It works to reveal how subjectivities are negotiated, contested, and constructed in discourse (Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou 2003) thus treating identity as a process, whilst taking into account the reality of diverse and ever-changing social experiences.

Within this approach, ‘stories’ comprise big canonical narratives or smaller ‘momentary and fleeting shifts into narrativity’ (Baynham & Georgakopoulou 2006), including ‘the sequential, moment by moment interactive engagements that are at best undertheorised and at worst dismissed in traditional identity inquiry’ (Bamberg 2011: 10). The argument that proponents of this approach hold is that more attention needs to be given to the microlinguistic and social structures of everyday small narrative phenomena (Georgakopoulou 2006), which could be applied to a wide range of narratives (Bamberg 2006a; Georgakopoulou 2006; Georgakopoulou 2007). The analysis of small stories therefore involves evaluating in fine-grained detail narrative interactions using methods typically associated with conversation analysis.

A small-story approach addresses the agentive and structural forces that operate in situated social and cultural contexts of personal narratives (McEntee-Atalianis & Litosseliti

2017) particularly utilising the notion of positioning. Positioning has been defined by Harré and van Langenhove as ‘the discursive process whereby people are located in conversation as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines’ (1999: 37). Positioning, due to its ‘here’ and ‘now’ qualities, is able to locate shifts in the reflective undertaking of telling and can be seen as a conceptualisation of ‘doing identities’ in narratives (Bamberg 2010; Bamberg 2011). In linguistic and sociocultural research, positioning marks the agentive discursive processes of identity construction (Korobov 2013). The main focus is placed on the social patterns and functioning of stories, whether ‘small’ sequences of conversation or ‘big stories’ that exemplify broad cultural narratives (Bamberg 2006; Baynham & Georgakopoulou 2006; Georgakopoulou 2007; Squire 2008). In small tellings, where fleeting moments of narrative orientation to the world can be easily dismissed by an analytical lens that is used to the study of grand narratives (Hymes 1996), acts of positioning are read as expressions of social behaviour and interpretations of available normative Discourses. These expressions/interpretations are taken up as narrators position themselves and are positioned by others, i.e., ‘the different subjectivities and subject positions they inhabit or have ascribed to them within particular social, historical, and cultural contexts’ (Block 2013: 18). ‘Subject positions’ here is an analytical concept used to describe the way in which a subject presents and represents him/herself discursively, psychologically, socially, and culturally through the use of symbolic systems (Edley 2001). Thus, acts of social positioning in stories are denoted by the ways in which narrators express stances³ and evaluations with respect to audiences, characters, and master narratives in their stories. These acts can take on many forms, each of which contribute to a narrative construction of identity (Andreouli 2010). In many ways, such a perspective is comparable to

³ Stance is used here to refer to the way in which individuals “tak[e] up a *position* with respect to the form or the content of one’s utterance” (Jaffe 2009:3). Stance is thus used as synonymous with positions.

the social representations approach⁴ (Andreouli 2010), and to Potter & Wetherell's (1987) 'interpretive repertoires'⁵. The hypothesis they support is that positions not only 'locate' people within social relations and discursive 'storylines' but also provide them with ways of making sense of the world. Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, 'a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts [that] are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned' (Davies & Harré 1999: 35).

The construct of positioning (Bamberg 1997; Wortham 2000) has emerged as one of the most popular tools for studying identity construction in narratives. Bamberg (1997) proposed looking at three levels of positioning in 'the here and now' of the storytelling in order to account for the ways in which identities are communicated. The first level involves positioning in the 'tale-world', examining how the narrator is located as a character in a story world vis-à-vis with other characters; the second level looks at positioning as an interactional process in which narrators position themselves and are positioned in relation to the audience; and the third level seeks to provide an answer to the question of 'who am I?', attempting to define the teller's self as a more or less stable entity holding above and beyond the current storytelling situation (see Chapter Three for further discussion).

Bamberg's (1997) interactional approach to positioning is grounded in social

⁴ Social representation theory (Moscovici 1984) is a theory of communication in social psychology and sociological social psychology, which refers to the processes of collective meaning-making that result in common cognitions which produce social bonds uniting societies, organisations and groups. Social representations in this sense "[...] concern the contents of everyday thinking and the stock of ideas that give coherence to our religious beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create as spontaneously as we breathe" (Moscovici 1988: 214). The theory argues that the stock of values, ideas, metaphors, beliefs, and practices that are shared among the members of groups and communities, often become subjected to conflicting ideological struggles that brings changes to collective thinking in society.

⁵ Interpretive repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1987) refers to "a culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes". These constitute individuals sense making methods at a given context locally managed positions in interaction. They further argue that sense making strategies rely on indexical constructions and invocations which require unpacking, and cannot be perceived adequately without paying attention "the relevant context of argumentation – premises, claims and counter-claims." (Wetherell, 1998: 400-1).

psychological theories of self-formation. These theories argue that identity construction may not always be in harmony. It can present opposing discursive struggles that are integral parts of the complex process of identity construction. Such complexity, as Bamberg explains, arises from three practical challenges or ‘dilemmatic spaces’ that face any self-formation (Bamberg 2011: 178). These include navigating the self between:

a. Agency and control: This refers to whether narrators act as active agents who choose to claim control (being agentive of their positions and self-constructions) or attribute agency to forces of socio-historical contexts (i.e., the subject is positioned by others). This proposes that the construction of agency as constituted by the self (with a self-to-world direction-of-fit) is placed in opposition to a construction of agency by others (with a world-to-person direction-of-fit) (Bamberg 2010: 7).

b. Sameness and difference: This view addresses the construction of self by looking at ‘how individuals *position* themselves in terms of *membership claims* vis-à-vis others’ (Bamberg et al. 2010: 184). Here, choices of discourse devices, category ascriptions or attributions to self and others, implied and claimed membership categories, or even choices of small stories (events) all serve to signal positions and mark affiliations in terms of proximity or distance, through discursive strategies of alignment or distancing. Through these discursive choices, people define a sense of self as different from others, or they integrate a sense of who they are into communities of others (Bamberg et al. 2010; Bamberg 2011).

c. Constancy and change: This dimension investigates discourses in which a view of identity as ‘the construction of a diachronic continuity and discontinuity [...] require[s] subjects to position a sense of self that balances the two extreme endpoints of this continuum: no change at all [...] and radical change from one moment to the next’ (Bamberg 2011: 103). It reveals how people incorporate past and present storied

narratives of self in order to present a more or less coherent sense of self and contribute to the construction of events, indexing transformations and constituting change through these storied accounts of self.

The above intersecting dilemmatic spaces suggest that self-formation is being constantly positioned with respect to social categories, values and personal dimensions (Bamberg 2011). The positioning framework conceives identity constructions as operating at and through these dimensions, suggesting that the individual agentively—though constrained by structural forces (Bamberg 2004)—draws upon and negotiates multiple circulating *Discourses* that regulate the rights and obligations of individuals/groups. Identities and positions can be constructed or challenged through particular tellings, indexical cues, or linguistic features during a particular situated discursive negotiation (McEntee-Atalianis & Litosseliti 2017).

Narratives, or story accounts provided by individuals, are understood to provide a sense of identity continuity and temporality and are seen as significantly connected with larger *Discourses* and/or master narratives that are part of the cultural context of the subject, thus influencing the way in which the subject displays, counters, or assumes positions for themselves or others (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg 2011). Individuals construct who they are by using smaller discourses that are often linked one way or another to master narratives or cultural scripts. An analysis of the concept of narrative therefore requires taking into account the idea of ‘what is being said, how it is said, and why it might have been said’—as it is contextually embedded at a particular point in time at a particular location (Bamberg 2010: 180).

This interaction between small stories and larger narratives reveals the way in which we, as individuals, claim positions in relation to various components that are part of who we are. This includes our gendered and sexual identities, which rely for their composition on the degree of conformity to socially constructed notions of femininities and masculinities. This is

in addition to identities of social class; age; and ethnic/racial identities (to name but a few) that place us within cultural groups based on a sense of a shared history, descent, belief systems, practices, language, and religion.

To summarise, the use of small stories combined with positioning analysis has enabled researchers to uncover relationships between ways of telling, sites, and tellers, as well as to reveal identities that extend beyond a single storytelling event. The salience of this approach, realised by attending to often overlooked acts of narrativity and a methodological microanalyses of identity construction ‘on the spot’ (Depperman 2014: 459), can reveal otherwise unnoticed associations between specific subjectivities and larger capital-D discourses operating beyond the narrative contexts. The implication that this line of inquiry has to this study is that it permits the documentation of specific ways/moments of storytelling and the subjectivities that emerge through those ways and moments, bringing to the fore identities that are less privileged and making them more available over time (Georgakopoulou 2014).

Small (and big)-story researchers in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics are increasingly looking for a range and diversity of storytelling practices to understand identities in the post-modern age. Given this study’s focus on identity representation in blogs, the discussion now turns to examining studies of identity and self-formation in social media contexts. The main argument is that stories told in social media in general, and blogs in particular, provide rich case studies for researchers to test existing definitions and frameworks for the investigation of identity in narrative.

2.4 Identity and Social Media

The advent of the Internet has given rise to a wealth of online environments wherein the everyday construction of identities is mediated by textual and multimodal tools involving

arguably new literacies and communicative genres. Social media, defined broadly by Leppänen et al. (2014) as including any digital environment that involves interaction between participants, allows for the exploration of the way in which identities are discursively and dialogically performed in interactions (for a thorough definition, see Leppänen et al. 2018). Seargeant and Tagg (2014) have argued that social media is based on two fundamental social dynamics: the presentation of self and the building and maintenance of networked relationships or communities, thus bringing to the fore many constructionist ideas about the nature of identity. A discursive approach to identity is ideally positioned to interpret the identity work that occurs in online contexts for the reasons discussed below.

Firstly, although interactions on social media multimodal (e.g. text, emoticon features, images, symbols, sound, likes, forwards, shares, etc.) text still prevails as a mode of communication, and a preferred one arguably, in outlets such as blogs and forums. Text, created by participants, can inscribe (explicitly state) or invoke (through stylistic choices) ‘identity cues’ (Goffman 1959) that offer conscious/deliberate and implied performances that form key resources in the presentation/construction of self. Vásquez has described this as the idea of ‘writing oneself into being’ (Vásquez 2014). Though an interpretation of identity as discursively formed through text alone aligns with the concept of performativity (Butler 1990), Page (2012) warned against a surface interpretation of identities in social media, arguing that ‘a contextualised approach to identity online must go beyond a surface level of interpretation of the discursive text alone [...] tak[ing] into account the ways in which identity work online connects with the identities that are performed in offline extra situational and behavioural contexts’ (p.18).

The degree of anonymity that social media users can enjoy serves as another important factor in constructing online identities through the way it impacts self-formation. Although various types of social media present different constraints and affordances, as in the case of a

‘closed’ or ‘private’ friends and family Facebook group versus an ‘open’ (i.e. accessible to all) Facebook or Twitter account for example. Studies show how individuals draw on the affordances of the social media platform they are using to foreground certain aspects of their identity and to present themselves in ways that reflect the new online situations in which they find themselves (Duguay 2016; Jones 2011; Page 2012). Research on self-presentation and self-disclosure in social media draws attention to the varying affordances that this medium provides and how this affects agency in self-representation, reporting, and in drawing audience attention (Garcia et al. 2009; Seargeant & Tagg 2014). Users are not bound to conventional dimensions of time and space nor to the sociocultural or linguistic boundaries that are present in the real world. Their access to multiple contexts and audiences reduces and blurs the boundaries between the public and private. Although this has led to critical debates around self-presentation online, that range from views of the ‘self’ as masked and separate from ‘real life’ (Turkle 1995) with individuals tending to present an ‘ideal version of the self’ that is often challenged offline (see Higgins 1987). In contrast to more recent work (e.g. Campbell 2014; Duguay 2016; Govers & Go 2016; Slater 2002; Yurchisin et al. 2005), which suggest that individuals in both face-to-face and online encounters present similar, contingent, multiple, and fluid identity performances (McEntee-Atalianis 2019).

A third and equally important factor that is seen as crucial to self-formation online is ‘authenticity’—that is, ‘the extent to which an online persona is seen by interlocutors to relate to the person behind it’ (Seargant & Tagg 2014: 7), which refers to the social value and ethical standards placed or established by other members of the interaction with respect to the perceived authentic presentation (Hew 2011). Authenticity plays a pivotal role in the ways in which people interact (Kane et al. 2014; Page 2013), as it provides an anchor for communication and establishes a level of trust between participants. Especially since interactants invest emotional energy and engage in personal disclosures on the basis that the

other interactants are who they claim to be. Researchers have postulated that authenticity is a socially-determined, localised, and temporally situated construct (McEntee-Atalianis 2019; Page 2013; Seargant & Tagg 2014). For instance, Coupland (2007) presents an analysis of a conversation between three friends who ridicule the ‘inauthentic styling of gang speech by their peers. Similarly, Page discusses how ‘inauthenticity’ is subjected to high surveillance by an online culture that distrusts ‘inauthentic’ presentations and works to expose such cases (see Page 2013:170, 177). Beasley and Haney (2013) suggested that, in relation to online disclosure, both context (i.e. platform) and content (i.e. the message) are determining factors in the level of perceived authenticity or ‘truthfulness’. However, a persona created online and shared publicly is expected to be truthful and to present a creative disclosure, offering truths about oneself that will be shared in relation to the needs of the individual and the social community, whilst also maintaining moral caution. Here, consistency in self-presentation becomes key to promoting authenticity. This commitment to truth-telling provides mutual benefit within the community (Christians et al. 1993; Christians et al. 2012), allowing multiple voices to introduce, share, and challenge perspectives and to gain verification from readers through commentary and other forms of digital reaction. Indeed narratives, and personal histories in particular, are seen as forms of ‘truthful narrative accounts’ (Christians et al. 1993: 119), monitored by the communicators and participants in social media settings, through constant acts of interaction, negotiation, challenge, and support, which ultimately establishes a cultural order (Beasley & Haney 2013).

However, an authentic self should not be seen as a ‘true’ presentation but rather as a multifaceted and complex presentation. One’s ‘authentic self’ is a socially determined construct that is created by online users and perceived by their audiences. For this reason, users may sometimes need to put extra effort in to be perceived as offering a recognisably authentic and credible identity, especially in online environments (Seargant & Tagg 2014).

Studies have shown that self-presentation online integrates various kinds of personal information through words, images and other available resources, which are combined to reveal credible and authentic representations of the self (Back et al. 2010; Haferkamp & Krämer 2011; Hall & Bernieri 2001).

Moreover, identity performance online is arguably affected by another communicative phenomenon, known as 'context collapse' (Wesch 2009). The notion of context collapse was developed to describe the fact that addressees on social network sites may be drawn from a plethora of contacts derived from the friends list, particularly in open social networking websites, such as blogs and twitter accounts (boyd 2001; Marwick & boyd 2011). Thus, the term aims to highlight how addressees are exposed to the same content produced by users addressing a variety of potential audiences simultaneously (Jones & Hafner 2012: 152). As such users construct and negotiate their positions, whilst taking into consideration the potential audiences for which they are performing. The latter, as noted by boyd, can be challenging.

Further, messages (or posts) often remain available for future readers until they are deliberately removed. The permanence of the message thus extends their performance beyond the point of initial communication, to address future potential audiences. This permanence creates an added complexity, projecting an identity that has the potential to be judged across time, in terms of authenticity (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014).

A final but crucial component of identity construction in digital environments arises from social alignments within online communities. Whilst context collapse refers to the complexity arising from addressing numerous potential audiences, the implication of belonging to a particular community lies in the ongoing interactions with close social networks of familiars (Thorne & Black 2011). Whether used as forms of social integration or disintegration (Giddens 2010), people in online communities define themselves in relation to

one another and to the group as a whole (Baym 2000). As Higgins (1987) explained, identities in social media are not just about ‘who we are, but also who we want to be to others and how others see us or expect us to be in our networked lives’ (cited in McEntee-Atalianis 2019: 121). People craft their identities online through interaction, in concert with others, and out of the diverse contextual resources available to them (Tiidenberg 2013).

Social media platforms are places for ‘networked individualism’ (Darvin 2016: 526) where individuals network with others based on shared interests, values, norms, and desirable social identities. In other words, social alignments online involve the development of new social relations with strangers around particular topics or experiences. Research, such as Androutsopoulos’ (2006) study of online community formation, has shown how such communities often employ shared indexicalities that demarcate their community boundaries online (Barton & Lee 2013). In relation to the formation of identities, users display explicit and implied discursive displays of connections with others by aligning themselves with different individuals, groups, opinions, and cultural/moral issues. According to Leppänen et al. (2014), people construct their identities ‘[as part of] active processes of identification and self-understanding, seeking or eschewing commonality, connectedness, and groupness’ (p.112).

This describes the community formation phenomenon of mutually structured and goal-oriented members, known as communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), becoming more tightly knit and cohesive (Lee et al. 2013). Social alignments online are found to develop around particular activities or shared cultural interest (e.g., fashion, celebrity fan pages, sickness and diseases), or purposefully structured around shared social variables (e.g., nationality, sexual orientation, language), or a combination of both (see Seargeant & Tagg 2014 for studies on specific communities). For individual members in these communities, user validation and self-affirmation are dependent on acceptance. This

places users in a challenging position as they construct their identities online, working hard to develop ‘authentic’ identities by enacting authenticating processes in alignment with other members.

2.4.1 Blogs as sites of identity construction.

Web logs (blogs) have been recognised amongst social scientists as a rich resource for online self-presentation (Aarsand 2008; Hookway 2008; Leander & McKim 2003; McMillan & Morrison 2006; Orgad 2009). They are often utilised as social spaces for the sharing of experiences, thus providing unabbreviated textual content for researchers interested in the discursive constructions of self in narratives (Bronstien 2013; Cook & Hasmath 2014; Giles 2006; Hookway 2008; Pullen 2006). The social, technical and communicative particularities of blogs for identity research are discussed below.

Blogs are a medium for creating social presence (DuVall et al. 2007), connecting with others, expressing ideas, sharing information (Macduff, 2009), and reflecting upon experiences (Chretien et al. 2008; Rourke & Coleman 2009). Technically, a weblog, or ‘blog’, refers to a website that contains a series of frequently updated, reverse-chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage, usually written by a single author (Bar-Ilan 2005; Herring et al. 2005; Serfarty 2004). In their early days, blogs were viewed as public diaries, ‘[spaces] for narrating personal life stories and [are said to] have much in common with autobiography and diary genres’ (Harrison 2014: 1). Today, there is a wide array of blog genres, ranging from politics to sports, which are used by individuals, media outlets, brands, entrepreneurs, and universities, to name a few—although many still function as personal online diaries. Blogs are a relatively free-form of social media, often running on their author’s main domains and connecting haphazardly to other blogs. Rettberg (2014) defined blogs as ‘an episodic genre, [which] leads to particular kinds of narrative structure[s]’

(p.115). Each post makes sense in itself, but, read together, not necessarily in sequence, the posts tell a larger story.

Blogs act as social spaces that facilitate the sharing of emotional/affective (along with other) experiences. Users write their posts with a clear expectation that their work will be received by an audience of readers. This writer–reader association is more complex than the classical reader intentionality known to writers (e.g. personal columns in newspapers). It involves affective sharing and self-disclosure that are often guided by social norms, both ‘local’, related to the expectations of the blogging community, and ‘imported’, brought in from the bloggers own social background. The level of affective sharing and self-disclosure is often related to bloggers’ motivations (Bronstein 2012; Hollenbaugh 2011; Li 2005; Lee et al. 2008; Nardi et al. 2004), ranging from a desire to document their lives, share information with others, and practice their writing, to creating and maintaining a network of social relations (Bronstein 2013). Online blogs and communities that are built around connecting with others, for example, other patients where clinical issues are discussed are often noted to act as support networks. This sharing of stories to online familiars has shown to be soothing and reassuring (Overberg et al. 2010), helping to enhance the quality of relationships and improve the psychological well-being of the support seeker (Bessière et al. 2010).

The creation and maintenance of social connections in blogs usually correlates with high amounts of self-disclosure that fosters the development of connections (Chen 2012; Herring et al. 2005; Hollenbaugh 2011; Nardi et al. 2004; Stefanone & Jang 2007; Viégas 2005). Different elements of self-presentation and self-disclosure on blogs have been investigated. These include, but are not limited to: various types of anonymity in self-presentation (Hollenbaugh & Everett 2013; Guadagno et al. 2008; Qian and Scott 2007; Schau & Gilly 2003); profiles of ‘disclosiveness’ (the individuals’ tendency to generally

disclose private information to others across contexts: Hollenbaugh 2010); environmental clues of self-disclosure, such as general life satisfaction, familiarity, and perceived warmth of location (Stefanone et al. 2009); gender-specific issues in blogging, e.g. discussions of digital domesticity and gender performance in mommy blogging (Chen 2013; Web & Lee 2011), or Jang & Stefanone's (2011) examination of the relationship between gender and self-disclosure; subjective well-being and social benefits resulting from self-disclosure in blogging (Ko & Kuo 2009; Kim et al. 2014); and the expression of emotions in blogging (Derks et al. 2008; Fullwood et al. 2013; Liao et al. 2011; Lopez 2014; Morris 2011; Nardi et al. 2004).

Blogs provide a unique venue for self-expression where bloggers can express feelings, thoughts, and ideas in an online environment that is less threatening than the equivalent face-to-face communication (Bargh et al. 2002; Baker & Moore 2008; Bronstein 2012; Nardi et al. 2004). Ross (Ross 2005; Ross et al. 2005) and Daneback (2006) have interestingly found that topics that are often avoided or hidden in our offline societies can be explored without fear of social repercussions online. This finding is supported by Deaux's social identity model, which suggests that members of stigmatised-identity Internet groups, such as infertile Muslim women in our case, are more likely to discuss difficult issues on-line with a shared community of stigmatised 'others' and in turn incorporate their virtual group membership into their self-concepts—that is, 'the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is' (Baumeister et al. 1999: 247). They are motivated to do so for two reasons, the first being its importance to them and the second being the lack of an offline equivalent for the group (Bargh & McKenna 2004; Harrison 2014).

Furthermore, the communicative affordances of blogs mean that individuals' public digitalised narrations are 'open to dialogue [with other bloggers and blog visitors] rather than

engaging in one-way communication’ (Schmidt 2007:1413). Researchers argue for the dialogical affordance of weblogs, claiming that blogposts ‘tend to be read zealously by other bloggers and interlinked with related blogs, thereby promoting responsive models of social relations’ (Killoran 2002; see also Mortensen & Walker 2002). Most blogs allow readers to leave comments, thus generating conversation and encouraging collaboration (Kovic et al. 2008). The variety of digital affordances available for constructing stories (e.g., words, images, links) in these websites help increase the level of interactivity. They present elaborate communicative means by which users express and negotiate content with others.

Researchers see blogs and online communities as places where one can present and construct a self or ‘type oneself into being’ (Sundén 2003: 3; see boyd 2007; Lampe et al. 2006; Siibak 2011), as these online spaces arguably allow for a more open and multilayered presentation of identity. Narrators’ identities, perspectives, and choices in forming each text deepen the meaning that bloggers are attempting to convey in online spaces (Keats 2009). In her discussion of acts of identity online, De Fina (2013: 154) argued that ‘[the] analysis of storytelling as a practice embedded within other practices provides important insights on [the] process of identity construction and more generally on the life of communities’. These assertions support this study’s investigation of identity and the social implications surrounding its expression through personal written narratives, as it permits the collection of substantial amounts of ‘relatively un–self-conscious’ naturalistic data (Hookway 2008).

In sum, blogs provide a space for emotional disclosures and a way to communicate thought and provoke discussions that may be otherwise silenced or inhibited off-line. In the context of this study, the medium of blogs enables/supports access into traditionally private narratives; in this case narratives about pregnancy, fertility, and the female body (see Harrison’s 2014 study on negotiations of infertility in blogs), in which private individual narratives are made public. Subsequently, these online spaces are a medium through which

women (re)negotiate their sense of self when motherhood is denied or difficult to attain.

2.4.2 The small-story approach to narrative analysis of online content.

The study of narrative in digital contexts follows to a large extent the tendencies of narrative theory to examine stories that exhibit canonical (Labovian) parameters (see section 2.3.1 above). These studies (e.g. Arendholz 2010; Baxter et al. 2012; Greenspan 2011; Ryan 2006; Vásquez 2012) have been influential in investigating the distinctive textual qualities and interactive affordances of hypertext narrative writing, and reinterpreting the reader's relationship with the text (Page 2013). However, driven by a need to attend to the vast array of non-canonical storytelling, enabled by the advent of social media, a small but significant number of researchers (see below) have turned towards utilising the small story analysis lens (section 2.3.1) to take into account everyday storytelling, investigating story-like fragments of tellings that fall outside the big narrative lens.

Researchers such as Dayter (2014; 2015; 2016) Georgakopoulou (2014; 2015) Jaworska (2018), Page (Page et al., 2013; Page 2018), Perrino (2018) and West (2013) have adopted the small-story approach to analyse the linguistic and rhetorical practices embedded in online user narratives. These researchers examine distinctive discursive accomplishments in relation to narrative and narrativity⁶. In relation to the aims of this study, Jaworska's (2018) and Perrino's (2018) studies are particularly relevant examples of the applicability of the small story framework, and its ability to tease out the various positions and embedded pervasive *Discourses* around particular subaltern identity constructions.

Jaworska (2018) applies small story positioning analysis to the study of narratives of

⁶ Narrativity conceptually suggests that social life and human lives are 'storied' and that through narrativity we come to understand the social world (Somers 1992; 1994). Somers describes four inter-related dimensions of narrativity – ontological, public, conceptual and meta-narratives that social identities are constituted through, and that guide social action, social processes and interactions at the institutional and interpersonal levels.

postnatal depression on Mumsnet (Mumsnet Ltd., London, England)⁷. Her study reveals how narrative practices form and transform illness identities in women who suffer from postnatal depression (PND). At the micro-level, her analysis shows how women draw *Discourses* of confession and exemplum - where confession is used as a way into the community of Mumsnet through disclosing PND stories, and exemplum is used as a tool for alignment, validation, and to advise others. Jaworska argues that the act of posting confessions positions the poster in an inferior 'sinner' position, rhetorically and discursively taken up through negative self-evaluations and attributions. However, she argues that the act of confessing is in itself an agentive role through which these women manage to tell the 'untellable' and take on positions that are outside the normative conceptualization of an ideal mother. These tensions are highlighted at the macro-level, where hegemonic *Discourses* about motherhood and personal experiences of PND come in conflict and are negotiated by posters who appropriate and re-work these *Discourses* to break silence and exercise agency. Jaworska's study shows how online narrative practices by women with a stigmatised condition are worked to produce transformative effects of trouble-telling and sharing online.

With a similar focus, Perrino's (2018) study analyses the retellings of traumatic experiences by looking at blogs in which Italians reported on the earthquake 'Emilia-Romagna' in 2012. The study investigates how Italian bloggers and commentators recontextualise, oppose, and reorient stories about natural disasters through an analysis of narratives. It also examines the way in which various enactments of these stories help to create a virtual sense of a shared community which lead to the construction of collective identities. Perrino argues that sharing and retelling personal stories of suffering creates a 'collective identity' that is recontextualised as a way to offer support and consolation to

⁷ A website that hosts discussion forums for parents in the United Kingdom. It contains a range of topics including shared advice and information on parenting.

people. In this way, storytelling online creates a sense of solidarity among virtual participants who share the same orientation toward the referenced event. She describes this as a ‘sympathy’-based collective identity that is co-constructed through narrative retellings. Her study concluded that narratives that are (co)constructed in the digital realm can be reshaped and manipulated for different ends. In particular, the analysis reveals how, through blogging about a shared event or interest, a collective identity between bloggers and commentators appears. This identity is (co)constructed, contested, solidified, and redirected (through narrative) to other shared concerns relevant to the interactants. This in turn can alter the expected configuration (sympathy) and transform it into something else, e.g. in this context to a political debate, which led to heated discussions about Italian environmental politics. In other words, through aligning and dis-aligning with different bloggers’ stances, social media users (both other bloggers and readers) co-constructed a different story, a counter-narrative in which the main event (i.e., the earthquake and its resulting damage) was made less prominent.

2.5 Investigations of the Identity of Subaltern Groups

In light of the focus of this thesis, the following section of the literature review discusses sociolinguistic investigations which have focused on the identity construction of subaltern groups, with particular emphasis on studies of gender and sexual identity and female Muslim identity. The discussion then moves on to online contexts, appraising how Muslim identities have been investigated in social media and discourse studies.

2.5.1 Gender and sexual identity.

Historically, the term ‘gender’ was adopted as a means of distinguishing between ‘sex’, the biological and generally binary distinction between male and female (Litossiliti 2006); and

the socialised aspects of femininity and masculinity (Marecek et al. 2004). Gender was seen as collectively referring to a group of traits, behaviours, and roles related to being male or female that are acquired in early childhood. From the moment a child is conceived, their sex and gender identity become salient to who they are and who they will be. Children learn at a very young age what it means to be a boy or girl in society and amongst their peers. They are frequently likely to be given masculine or feminine names based on their sex, to be assigned colours that are deemed appropriate to their particular sex, and to be provided toys that will aid them in occupying their gendered roles in society. Bussey and Bandura (1999) amongst other scholars have argued that gender/social conformity (Cialdini & Goldstein 2004) is deeply ingrained even amongst adolescents—that is, children conform to choices that their peers find more popular because they want to be like others of their sex. These gendered choices and individuals' representations of them are significant, as they portray culturally appropriate social expectations and experiences. They allow individuals to express attitudes and take on stances in relation to their current status as either women or men (LaFrance et al. 2004).

Social psychologists and sociolinguists, influenced by the sexual revolution in the 1960s (see Allyn 2016 for a thorough discussion), have questioned the treatment of gender as a fixed and determined personal trait. Researchers have argued for a need to reconsider common conceptualisations of binary distinctions between masculine/feminine and male/female, which view gender as strictly social and of sex as strictly biological (Johnson & Repta 2012: 86; Litosseliti 2006b). Many have advocated an understanding of gender as 'an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society' (West & Zimmerman 1987: 126). Social constructionist theorists such as Butler (1990) Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), and Diamond (2008) (to name but a few) have

postulated that gender is a socially constructed, rather than biologically determined, construct (see Section 2.1 above). They conceptualise gender identity not as a stable, fixed category but instead as something that is performed and fluid; something that may vary over time and space for any individual.

Current theories of gender recognise people as active agents involved in their own ‘gendering’ or ‘doing gender’ (Litossiliti 2006: 58). The notion of womanhood/femininity or manhood/masculinity is no longer considered an *a priori* generic binary, but is rather seen as accomplished through an active process of ‘gendering’, or what Fenstermaker and West (2013) call ‘gender activities of doing’ (see also Lorber 1994b). Gender and sexuality are seen as performed through symbolic means within socio-historical frames, through a repeated process of appropriation, selection and negotiation (Butler 1990). Individuals’ behaviour varies in relation to the context - the interactants, the purpose, time and place of the interaction (McEntee-Atalianis 2019). It is also greatly influenced by the individual’s understanding of their own gender and sexual identity - the latter related to the way in which an individual behaves as a sexual entity (e.g., their sexual orientation). The expression of gender can, therefore, be shaped, styled, changed and perceived differently within the same community, over time and space and across different occasions and interactions. Gender divisions are thus, as Alsop and colleagues note, ‘part of an identity woven from a complex and specific social whole (2002: 86), thus requiring very specific and local readings.

The complexity and sophistication of gender expression, invited post-structuralists working within the fields of language and gender and language and sexuality to seek to identify the nature of and reasons for varying stylisations and realisations that constitute masculine and feminine ways of behaving (e.g. Baker 2008; Bucholtz et al. 1999; Bucholtz & Hall 2004; Butler 1996; 2003; 2004; 2007; Cameron 1998; 2005; Cameron & Kulick 2005; Coates 2003; 2015; Eckert 2008; Hall 1995; 1997; 2013; Keisling 2011; Ochs 1992; Levon

2011; Levon & Mendes 2016; Litossiliti 2006; Litossiliti & Sunderland 2002; Lorber 1994a; 1994b, to name but a few). These studies have moved beyond simple identification of differing patterns of linguistic behaviour to focus instead on investigations of cultural and institutional Discourses of heterosexuality and heteronormativity; sexual violence, labelling, and marginalisation; and normative/non-normative sexual identities. They study gender performance, looking at the ways in which people enact their gender identities through language, attire, and social behaviour (examples discussed below).

The role and significance of studying powerful regulatory structures that influence subject positioning, such as hegemonic masculinity, social heteronormative norms and gender performativity, (McEntee-Atalianis 2019), stems from an intersecting body of research on language and gender and language and sexuality. Their significance lies in their effect on ideological and linguistic constructions, and thus on identity. Hegemonic masculinity (or femininity- see Krane 2001 for a discussion) (Connell 1987, 1995), act as powerful sociocultural and ideological forces that are often constructed and maintained by subjects as an indication of status in narratives of ideal gender. These identity constructions can affect the lifestyle and choices of individuals and lead to the subordination and marginalisation of others. Coates (2003) states that ‘heterosexuality is thus not just about sexual object choice, but it also has a social construction that is primarily used by social actors to compete with same sex groups’ (p. 285). Hegemonic masculinity can thus become a discursive tool to enact gender differentiation and domination (e.g., see Levon 2016⁸).

Similarly, heteronormativity, defined as a supposition by society/social institutions that heterosexuality is the norm, is seen as a performed process in which the materiality of the body and the performativity of gender become marked and formed by discursive practices

⁸ Levon (2016)’s study investigates the connection between personal and social experience and the regulatory constraints imposed by hegemonic masculinity discourses.

(Butler 2003). Through this process, bodily norms are assumed, appropriated, taken on or contested by the subject through normative sexed identifications.

Individuals act as sexual entities through an inclination to sexual preferences/orientation. This sexual identity is based on a system of socially constructed and mutually constituted ideologies and practices that define the body as a sexually erotic or reproductive site (Bucholtz & Hall 2004 ; Levon 2011; Levon & Mendez 2016; Cameron 2011; Cameron & Kulick 2005).). Language used by individuals, communities, and socio-political institutions work to both construct and sustain heteronormative identifications that affect the performance of gender and sexual identities of both individuals and groups. The performance of gender and sexuality is then constructed through symbolic means within available historical and sociocultural frames, in which social practice becomes the product of cultural ideologies. Thus, individuals are observed to consciously and subconsciously perform acts that constitute feminine or masculine roles. These are tied to their social identifications and contextual influences; affected by social and political *Discourses/powers*. In other words, socially recognisable identities are legitimised through their repeated performance and representation.

Studies of gender performativity (Butler 1990, see Section 2.1 above) such as Keisling (2011) and Cameron (2011) have investigated the way in which masculinity and femininity are constructed and policed within social groups and communities of practice, arguing that acceptance within the group is a main motivation for individuals' gender performance/adherence. Cameron (2011) described the way in which students discussing others who ascribed to a gay identity use strategies of distancing and critique towards them whilst adopting styles and behaviours that align with cultural perceptions of being an attractive male. Thus, the performance of gender is arguably achieved by positioning the self/group in relation to 'the other'. Keisling (2011) goes further, arguing that, in addition to

drawing on differences and/or similarities with others, individuals use discursive displays of dominance and superiority, creating an ideal gender construction of femininity or masculinity in a competitive manner. Thus, differentiation and domination are powerful discursive strategies that are used to enact gender.

Many have also discussed the multiplicity and diversity of gender and sexual identities and how they are fluid and context-dependant (e.g. Coates 2011; Kendal 2008; Lefkowitz & Sicoli 2007; Ostermann 2011). Gender performance is revealed as negotiated and displayed in distinct and diverse ways when addressing different audiences. For example, Kendall (2008) demonstrates how the parents of a young child adopt distinct interactional roles when addressing their daughter. The mother takes on a disciplinary role, whilst the father takes on a 'softer' humorous role. Kendall argues that these gendered performances are built through a momentary process of enacting social roles and stances at variance to stereotypical masculine (patriarchal) and feminine roles.

Similarly, as part of a study on female telephone sex workers in California, Hall (1995) details the exaggerated fluidity of identity evident in the linguistic markers of these female workers, as they enact a variety of fantasy women of different personas and ethnicities in 'role play' performed for the enjoyment of male clients. Although these enactments are arguably deliberately performed, they demonstrate the linguistic dexterity involved in adopting various personas that are often far removed from the sex workers' status and context.

An exploration of the intersection between the production of gender/sexuality and its link to other relevant categories/systems (e.g., race, ethnicity, social class and so on) has become central to the investigation of gender and sexual identity performance (Bilge 2010a; McCall 2008; Taylor 2010). Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989; Crenshaw 1991) becomes particularly relevant here, as it involves an understanding of gender and sexuality

production that is linked to other relevant social stratification systems (Levon & Mendes 2016). For example, Davies (2008) demonstrated the complexities and variations that arise when one category of identity such as gender intersects with another, such as race or ethnicity.

However, postmodern researchers argue that a description of ‘intersecting’ identities continues to suggest fixed, observable realities and homogenised social categories that are added together in some way. In her study on South Asian women’s position in the labour market, Brah (1996) foregrounds the interconnectedness of the macro and the micro. She argues that an ‘analysis of women’s narratives must be framed against wider economic, political and cultural processes in non-reductive ways. [...] structure, culture and agency [and] conceptualized as inextricably linked, mutually inscribing formations (Brah, 1994, p.152)’. Hence, intersectionality needs to be viewed from a sophisticated ‘variable with variable’ interpretation of multiple, co-constituting analytic categories that are operative and equally salient in constructing institutionalized practices and lived experiences. As a framework, intersectionality addresses how multiple social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status) intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect multiple interlocking systems of privilege and oppression at the macro, social-structural level (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism) (Davis 2008).

To this point, researchers such as Levon and Mendes (2016) and Pichler (2008; 2011) argue that the intersection of gender and other categories is complex and tied to local sites of interaction in which the identity is enacted. Through providing a sophisticated address of identity representation, an intersectional view needs to view intersecting variables as gradient degrees of ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’ or ‘religious identity’ etc. Another example of intersecting identities in locale interactions, Henriksen (2017) looks at gendered ethnic positioning in street-based interactions. The case study she presents of a Danish and Israeli-Jewish

participant, shows how this character enacts an Arab/Muslim identity having grown up in a ghetto predominantly inhabited by immigrants of Middle Eastern Arab descent. Driven by her quest for social belonging, their participant altered her language, style, and physical appearance to appropriate a street-oriented minority ethnic positioning. However, the participants' ethnic positioning was found to shift from acting shamefully about her ethnic descent in her early teenage years to the production of a more congruent narrative about identity and social belonging in her early 20s, when she converted and began to identify as a 'Danish-Muslim'. During this shift, Henriksen concludes, the gendered identification of the young woman displayed a gradient of positions, exhibiting a great deal of flexibility and fluidity, constantly changing both over time and within single interactions. The study not only shows how gender and sexual identities intersect with the ethnicity and class but shows how this intersection is sophisticated. Even at instances where the participant is working to perform one type of social identity, other identities are realised and negotiated within the dynamics of the social terrain, identities that are often defined and determined by racial and gender hierarchies.

In sum, an understanding of gender and sexual identity necessitates a study of its performativity, taking into account powerful intervening *Discourses* and the intersection between different identities. In light of this understanding, we now turn to a discussion of the identity of Muslim women.

2.5.2 The identity of Muslim women.

Jung argues that recent studies on modern Muslim subjectivity reveal that the common perception of a modern Muslim woman is 'female, pietistic, and representing a fundamental alternative to subjectivity in the so-called West' (2017:11). In other words, Muslim women are expected to be representative of the whole Islamic community through a set of

behaviours, conduct, and demeanour that adheres to Islamic *Discourses* and social norms. Although such a conclusion is arguably too simplistic and conflates the complexities of what constitutes Muslim people more generally, and women's subjectivity more specifically, it is nevertheless reflective of stereotypical and powerful *Discourses* that offer a frame of reference for discussants with regard to actions and assumptions about the roles and qualities of Muslim women.

Perceptions around Muslim women are often complicated by *Discourses* of Islam and Orientalism (among others) that repackage historical conceptions of Muslim culture as 'uncivilised', 'uncultured', and 'irrational' (Saeed 2007). Muslim women are often confronted by these predetermined *Discourses* and practices that shape their agency and determine their strategies of resistance (Khan 1998). In Western contexts, where Muslim women are generally a minority, 'discussions of gender mark Muslim immigrants as different from [the] majority [of] society' (Korteweg & Yurdakul 2009: 222). Bilge (2010a) argued that the under-representation of Muslim women's voices tends to reinforce the view that they are passive or disengaged. Lemons (2007) suggested that the opinions of mainstream media in the West, reporting on Muslim women, are often formed based on two notable tropes/assumptions about gender in Islam and the role of religion in liberating society: specifically, the comportment of the female body as a mark of relative progress and Islam as a force of repression, respectively. Whilst the former refers to how Islamic attire and demeanour is seen as a sign of oppression (whereas a more 'Westernised' appearance would indicate a more progressive female persona), the latter refers to a perceived association between religion and the lower social rank that Muslim women are seen to occupy in relation to men and in their societies. Werbner (2007), for example, states that the Muslim hijab (veil) is a sign that Muslim women 'are [collectively] a problematic minority refusing to integrate' (p. 163). His argument proposes that 'the hijab raises a series of questions about

meaning, diasporic mobilizations, identity, multiculturalism, cultural difference, political Islam, gender, agency, transnationalism, and globalisation' (Werbner 2007: 173).

Media Discourses often focus on female attire to present Muslim women as either passive victims of traditional patriarchy, or as cultural outsiders stubbornly refusing to engage with Western societies (Meer, Dwyer, & Modood 2010). Lemons (2007) postulated that this rhetoric, and the normative assumptions that underlie it, are reflective of global perceptions of Muslim women; stereotypical viewpoints that are unable to engage with the different conceptions that people adopt regarding liberation and religion independently. In this sense, Abu-Lughod (2002: 783) highlighted that there is a need for a situated understanding of liberation that looks at women in context and recognises differences rather than the prevailing oriental discourse that views Muslim women as weak and oppressed, needing to be 'saved' by others.

Muslim women have been generally discussed in the literature using binary representations (Gao 2018; Zubair & Zubair 2017) as either liberated/progressive or traditional/oppressed. However, more recent work reveals how Muslim women present hybrid identities that reflect agentic personas that constantly negotiate, adapt to, and contest societal positionings. For example, Gao (2018) examined university-educated Muslim women in different cultural contexts and concluded that, while traditional models conceptualise Muslim female university students as 'rebels' against their heritage religion and culture, women in her study presented a hybrid identity that embraces the target and heritage cultures in an additive and empowering manner. These findings are corroborated by Zubair and Zubair's (2017), who demonstrate that young Muslim women in universities not only negotiate the Western notions of feminism, but simultaneously work to challenge the indigenous patriarchal hegemonies and conservative religious points of view in their social context. In a different context, Essers and Benschop (2009) analyse the life-stories of Muslim

businesswomen in the Netherlands. Their study illustrates how these women negotiate a complex landscape of cultural, ethnic, and religious boundaries in order to construct and present themselves as entrepreneurs. This negotiation includes pushing and reconstructing social and ideological boundaries between Islam, gender, and ethnicity to facilitate an agentive persona and to create a social space for their entrepreneurial roles. Hence, Muslim women are shown to enact a variety of discursive legitimations to stretch the boundaries of the cultural scripts through which they live their lives. Essers and Benschop argue that while Islam appears to provide the discursive touchstone that defines the discursive space available for the ‘boundary work’ from which the Muslim women articulate their identities as businesswomen, their room for manoeuvring is further constrained by the wider cultural meta-narratives of gender and ethnicity, noting how ‘identity construction in the context of entrepreneurship [becomes] complicated when multiple social categories are involved’ (2009: 405).

In relation to the linguistic construction of self in discourse, Essers and Benschop’s revealed how women seemingly negotiate the boundaries of their identities around an essential—albeit creatively reconstructed—notion of themselves as ‘good Muslimas’. In their stories, these women deploy a range of creative discursive strategies to accommodate and reconstruct resilient master-narratives, both social and religious, which define and limit the positioning of their desired ‘self’. In this regard, the discursive moves enacted by Muslim businesswomen aim to secure a ‘coherent self’ as good Muslimas in the face of an ‘outside’ world where being a Muslim, a woman, and an entrepreneur occupies a volatile ‘intersection’ of the prevailing cultural, gendered, and religious master-narratives (Essers & Benschop 2009). These studies establish that stereotypical and assumed ideologies associated with gender, culture, social norms, and religion often restrict particular types of identities and roles that Muslim women assume. In turn, women work to reconstruct and negotiate these

assumptions towards a favoured performance of ‘self’ that fits within the desired roles/identities that women seek. This is achieved not only through challenging preconceptions but also by offering alternative interpretations that fit in with those desired roles/identities.

2.5.3 Muslim women and social media.

Muslim women today, according to Piela, are still frequently perceived as stuck in the past and unable to cope with or address challenges of the ‘modern’ world (Bullock 2002; Piela 2012). Many of these women have thus turned to social media to challenge such notions and stereotypes ‘by constructing their own understanding of religious texts [through which they] recover knowledge of their rights and entitlement’ (Piela 2012:2). Arguably, this has enabled a number of women to dispute the religious status quo, where they often hold an underprivileged status based on the current power dynamics (Inhorn 2006).

Research which has focussed on Muslim women’s online activities has mostly taken an ethnographic approach (Amir-Ebrahimi 2008; Brouwer 2004, 2006; Bhimji 2005; Bhimji 2009) and has viewed Islam as an inherited aspect of an individual’s ethnic identity (Zaman 2008). Zaman (2008) has argued that Muslim women today construct their religious identity in relation to various interpretations of Islamic sources that they choose to adopt. An example of this is realised in the increasing number of modest fashionable ‘hijabi’ bloggers and vloggers (video-bloggers) who have reinterpreted traditional Islamic norms and global perceptions/assumptions related to Muslim women’s dress codes to fit within modern fashion trends and appearances (Baulch & Pramiyanti 2018; Kavakci & Kraeplin 2017; Lewis 2013; Lewis 2015). In particular, Baulch and Pramiyanti’s study of Indonesia’s ‘hijaber’ community on the social media platform Instagram (Facebook, Inc., Menlo Park, CA, USA) highlighted how hijabers employ the photo-sharing site as a stage for performing ‘middle-

classiness' but also for teaching about and spreading Islam. The authors argue that, through the presentation of images of Muslimah bodies and disseminating them as part of a Quranic imperative (i.e., spreading Islam), these women manage a reconstruction and reinterpretation of the 'hijab' on Instagram as a Muslim variant of postfeminist performances. They therefore project a feminised variant of electronically-mediated Muslim preaching. In doing so, these women exert control over their bodies by way of postfeminist performances of female entrepreneurship and, at the same time, challenge the male-dominated role of 'Muslim preaching'.

Hassan (2018) discusses how Muslim women, as a culturally under-represented group in the United States, use social media platforms to shape and negotiate their identities. She argued that her participants manage self-presentation by separating, accommodating, or assimilating to their socialised realities, in relation to the following six themes: modesty and hijab; uniting with other Muslims globally; expressing complex identities (e.g., proud, unique, and sometimes insecure); facing racism, colourism, and prejudice as Muslim women; intersectionality (Islamic versus cultural practices); and navigating differences between being Muslim-American and Muslim-Other. Her study revealed how the participants take control of social media and use it as a way to present themselves and their complex identities to the world. More specifically, the findings that Hassan presented highlight the co-cultural communicative strategies that Muslim women use in order to negotiate and share with others who they are with those they interact with, as well as to embrace their differences within the pre-determined power structures of US society.

In a similar account of online self-representation, Piela (2012; 2013) examined online newsgroups created and used by Muslim women. She argued that participants in her study shape perceptions of who they are online and offline: online by constructing their identities through narratives of hermeneutical and epistemological positions on gender-based

interpretations of Islamic sources; and offline via choices and actions influenced by those online interpretations. Piela additionally showed how Muslim women use social media as a space to engage with the Qur'an, Sunnah (traditions of the Prophet Muhammad), and Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Through these media, some of these women highlight issues of gender and gender justice that are absent from many mainstream interpretations of Islam, while others prefer to preserve the primacy of classical Islamic interpretations produced by male scholars. Drawing on a detailed analysis of online transcripts, Piela shows how women employ rhetorical techniques and display a thorough knowledge of Islamic sources, which they use in a combined fashion to justify their points in online discussions. She details how, in the online context, as opposed to offline interactions, Muslim women are much more willing to cross boundaries between varying Islamic interpretations of women's Islamic rights and responsibilities and to develop collaborative interpretations with supporters of different views. The study further extended this argument, suggesting that women take up varying positions with regard to religion — egalitarian, believing in gender equality; traditionalist, maintaining classical interpretations, and holistic, those who focus on developing the Islamic sisterhood, respectively. Piela notes it is the latter category that enabled a movement beyond the limiting binary of egalitarian/progressive versus traditionalist/conservative viewpoints. Women who take a holistic stance are found to exhibit a strong sense of Islamic sisterhood and to actively work to strengthen the bonds between all women (Muslim and non-Muslim, Piela 2012). She argues that the concept of sisterhood that emerged in her study formed the root of most newsgroups. It was useful and adaptable because of its inclusive nature, as it went beyond Islamic sects, social class, age, and race (Piela 2012). This finding is supported by Bastani (2001) who showed how spiritual and emotional connections and support form the basis on which women construct and maintain sisterhood online; especially because of the limited likelihood of encountering other women

with similar interests in face-to-face interaction.

Having provided an account of how Muslim women debate and reinterpret gender religious Discourses in social media, in the following we discuss what it means to be an infertile Muslim woman. This discussion is preceded by a survey of recent studies which have addressed infertile subjectivity more generally.

2.6 Infertility Studies

Infertility is both a social position and a medical condition. It entails complicated social meanings usually attributed to a range of cultural norms and social perceptions/experiences that regulate hegemonic practices on the normative gender roles of ‘males’ and ‘females’. Over recent decades, there has been a surge of interest among social scientists about experiences of (in)fertility, pregnancy, and motherhood. Until recently, studies have predominantly focused on women’s experiences in Western contexts (see e.g., Baldwin 2017; Bronstein 2013; Culley et al. 2013; Greil et al. 1988; Greil et al. 2011; Johnson & Fledderjohann 2012; Letheryby 2010; Malin et al. 2001; McQuillan et al. 2001; Rice & Katz 2000; Whitehead 2016) However, there has been a recent surge of interest in infertility in non-Western settings (e.g. Becker & Nachtigall 1994; Farquhar 1991; Fido & Zahid 2004; Handwerker 1995; Hasanpoor-Azghdy et al. 2015; Inhorn 1994; Inhorn & van Balen 2002; Jrade 2016; Kinloch 2018; Mumtaz et al. 2013; Neff 1994; Remennick 2000; Riessman 2000; Tabong & Adongo 2013; van Balen et al. 1999).

Although central to the experience of infertility, attention has only recently been directed to the fact that infertility is socially and culturally contingent (Hampshire et al. 2012). Some have attempted to understand the association between infertility, language and identity (e.g. Bailey 1999; Gibson et al. 2000; Keilmann 1998; Kinloch 2018; McMahon

1995; 1999; Steuber & Solomon 2008; Tabong & Adongo 2013). However, most scholars have treated infertility ‘as a medical condition with psychological consequences rather than as a socially constructed reality’ (Greil et al. 2010: 140). Many studies have captured the experiences of infertile people within medical contexts. These have focused on an analysis of medical *Discourses* and the linguistic practices of patients attending clinics. However the focus has been to assess the need for psychological counselling, training, and teaching, or to improve service delivery and empower service providers, rather than studying the sociocultural and contextual effects of infertility on individual patients/clients (Becker & Nachigall 1991; Cousineau & Domar 2006; Wilson 2014; Greil et al. 2010). Moreover, most of these studies lack a linguistic focus that is dedicated to scrutinising functional and rhetoric manifestations and/or exposing powerful/hegemonic ideologies in discourse. With the exception of a few researchers, such as Reissman (2000), who analysed stigma and infertility in narratives of South Indian women, and Ellece (2012), who addressed infertility as part of the compulsory construction of motherhood *Discourses* in Botswana, the existing literature is rather lacking in terms of sociocultural–linguistic approaches to the study of infertility in culture-specific communities, including the Muslim community.

That being said, non-linguistic social research on infertility in non-Western contexts and immigrant communities in the West, particularly feminist and anthropological studies, offer important insights about the multiple medical and social *Discourses* that surround infertility (Culley et al. 2004; Schmid et al. 2004). Whilst acknowledging the diversity of these ‘infertility’ experiences, these studies suggest that psychological and social consequences of infertility are more pronounced in contexts that perceive parenthood as a mandatory and pivotal role, as in the case of women in less-industrialised societies (Akarsu & Beji 2019; Greil et al. 2011; Inhorn 1994; Inhorn 1996; Inhorn & Bharadwaj 2008; Nahar 2011). Feminist researchers who investigated the social and cultural aspects of women’s

reproductive experiences have found that, similar to Western subjects, there is an emphasis placed on the centrality of the infertility experience on a woman's sense of self. In the majority of cases, women with fertility problems report social isolation and grief as the main consequences of the condition (Johansson and Berg 2005). They experience emotions of negative identity, worthlessness, inadequacy, lack of control, anger and resentment, depression, anxiety and stress, lower life satisfaction, feelings of envy towards other childbearing peers, loss of the sense of co-creating a family, and unstable emotional day-to-day experiences (Annandale & Clark 1996; Bell 2013; Culley et al. 2013; Inhorn 1994; Inhorn 1996; Inhorn & Balen 2002; Letherby 1997; Letherby 2002). According to Akarsu and Beji (2019), religious and spiritual issues of stigmatization create an added layer of difficulty for Muslim women experiencing infertility.

Whilst immensely valuable in terms of exploring the experiences of women, these studies' approaches are often linked to presupposed pervasive feminist constructs such as gender inequalities and/or patriarchal representations of the female body, paying less attention to discursive and lived, context-specific, and reflexive individual accounts from women themselves. Although a few anthropological investigations have demonstrated how infertility provokes multiple themes and cultural values relating to the taken-for-granted life path (marriage and motherhood) and gender roles (sexual and feminine heteronormative roles attributed to women) (Inhorn & van Balen 2002), it becomes apparent that discursive/linguistic factors need to be accounted for.

2.6.1 Social constructionist approaches to infertility.

A study of identity in relation to infertility necessitates an investigation of the discursive and lived experiences of women. Indeed, this understanding incorporates an appreciation of the contextual background and infertility *Discourses* relevant to women's subjectivity. These

Discourses—such as the taken-for-granted gendered roles, cultural values of marriage and motherhood, gender inequalities and/or patriarchal representations of the female body, and the social pressures and effects of stigmatisation that are brought or forced on individuals facing infertility in their specific contexts—necessitate a more inclusive investigation of subjectivity that stems from performance and social practice, one that acknowledges the social and psychological impacts of infertility. In this sense, Bell (2013) argued that researchers must challenge the dominant construction of infertility by looking at infertility ‘as a human issue that affects people in multidimensional ways: at the individual (micro) level, at the family and local community (mezo) level, and at the societal (macro) level’ (Bell 2013: 286).

Taking a social constructionist perspective, Bell and other scholars have attempted to offer a broader approach to the study of infertility (Bell 2013; de Kok 2009; Greil 1988; Greil 2011). In his pioneering article on infertility and gender attributes, Greil (1988) presents an important argument in this respect:

‘From a social construction perspective, infertility is not to be viewed as a static condition with psychosocial consequences but [rather] as a dynamic, socially conditioned process whereby couples come to define their inability to bear their desired number of children as problematic and [must] attempt to interpret and correct this situation. The infertility process is collective, in that the experience of being infertile is negotiated between the couple and is influenced by physicians, friends, relatives, and possibly psychotherapists. It is also an open-ended process characterised by alternating hope and disappointment and by constantly changing medical definitions of the situation. It is a process that varies by race, class, and cohort [...]. When we view infertility from a social construction perspective, the question of the role of gender in the consensual process of “becoming infertile” necessarily becomes paramount’ (Greil et al. 1988: 175).

When aligning with Greil's argument, it becomes apparent that the complicated biosocial and psychological nature of infertility is ideally understood through its social construction. Claiming an infertile identity, includes: the person's definition of themselves as infertile or their decision to resort to treatment, which only happens if they embrace parenthood as a desired individual/social role; the negotiation of their infertile state by themselves, the medical professionals who they consult and the society to which they belong; and the presence of multiple and various solutions to this health problem other than pursuing a 'cure' (Greil 2010, 2011). In other words, infertility is best understood as a socially constructed process whereby individuals come to regard their inability to have children as a problem, to define the nature of that problem, and to construct an appropriate forward course of action (Greil 2011). The conception of self and identity thus becomes paramount.

Following on from the prior discussion, it could be argued that Muslim women's identity when intersected with infertility and its various problematic implications, merits a discursive investigation. The following section unpacks the particularities of this complexity and serves to provide salient background on this study's informants.

2.6.2 Infertility and Muslim women's identity.

In the context of Muslim communities, the study of women's identity(ies) in relation to infertility includes a complicated matrix of cultural narratives, religious epistemologies, and gender normativities. Most Muslim communities are rooted in societies and cultures that preserve strong pronatalist norms, where 'children are highly desired and parenthood is culturally mandatory' (Culley 2009: 24). According to Inhorn and Balen (2002: 9), infertile couples face not only emotional difficulties, due to their inability to conceive, but also 'severe difficulties in achieving their social security, social power, and social perpetuity

desires'. Women in particular are faced with profound social suffering (Inhorn & Balen 2002). With time, their lack of pregnancy becomes both increasingly physically and socially visible and they are often subjected to blame or shame for their reproductive failures (Inhorn 2003). The disruptive power that infertility has over women's lives becomes more pronounced in Muslim societies, where procreation carries social and religious expectations for married women (Inhorn 1994; Obeidat et al. 2014). The Islamic culture/religion asserts certain socio-religious expectations and socially expected roles regarding motherhood, procreation, and women's positions as wives. These roles/expectations amplify the influence of infertility on their position and status in Muslim societies and on their perceptions of self, their gender roles, and their sexuality.

Religion is often used to support societal expectations and norms. Generally, belonging to the Islamic faith places a set of expectations that go beyond the religious and spiritual actions of Muslims. It involves individuals' cultural, behavioural, and even intellectual directions (Goodwin 1994; Lutz 1987; Nagi 1984). Although Muslims vary tremendously as individuals in relation to their demographic, cultural, linguistic, and educational particularities and way of life, their behaviours are nevertheless experienced and mediated through similar ideological interpretations of Islam. The concept of family, which is reinforced and rendered sacred by Islam, is often employed by social members, religious institutions, and policymakers to emphasise and preserve traditional cultural roles, systems, and values including marriage and reproduction. These patriarchal norms, characterised by relations of power and authority of males over females, obtain their legitimacy from deeply engrained pervasive discursive ideologies of male superiority (Inhorn 1996) and from religious groundings as expressions of 'God's will' (Barakat 1993). Hence, women's reproductive roles are presented as part of their religious roles and are shaped by cultural Discourses that project some form of control over their actions and decisions, acting as

determiners of positions into which these women are placed or place themselves.

Reproduction in Muslim communities is seen as a natural and immanent part of marriage, where the success of a marriage becomes almost conditioned upon having children⁹. In ethnographic research involving British Pakistanis in Oxford, Shaw (2000; 2004) highlighted how the central role of marriage and parenthood enables a new bride to establish her position in the marital home. She reports on how concerns about infertility could be raised within weeks of marriage if a pregnancy has not been announced. Similarly, research conducted on South Asian ‘communities’ in Leicestershire (Culley & Hudson 2006; Culley et al. 2006; Culley & Hudson 2009) underscores the socially mandatory nature of parenthood for Muslims and the stigma associated with childlessness. Culley et al.’s (2006) work affirms other findings about childless Muslim couples that have noted how these individuals become subjected to intense scrutiny and pressure to seek a resolution to infertility, whether through treatment or remarriage (see Schmid et al. 2004; Van Rooij et al. 2004; 2006; 2009 for similar findings among other minority Muslim populations in Europe). In a different context, Obeidat et al. (2014) found that bearing and rearing children are central acts to women’s power and well-being in Jordan. They also stress that this equates to an equal amount of stigma likely arising when pregnancy is not attainable. Their investigation identified several elements that were shared amongst infertile women in their sample, including missing out on motherhood, experiencing marital stressors, feeling social pressure, enduring depression and disappointment, having treatment-associated difficulties, using coping strategies, and suffering fear of an unknown future.

Certainly, to Muslim women, infertility does not constitute a problem just for the individual (or couple) but rather is seen as one that involves extended family members and

⁹ Similar observations have been reported by Ellece (2012) in considering the construction of motherhood as a compulsory and indispensable aspect of feminine identity in sub-Saharan African contexts.

wider communities. Women with an infertility are placed at the centre of this problem and are often subjected to blame, gossip, and social exclusion (Culley & Hudson 2009; Shaw 2000; Shaw 2004). A woman's lack of pregnancy becomes both highly (physically and socially) visible, especially in high-birth-rate societies¹⁰ wherein women are typically blamed for reproductive failures, even in cases of male infertility (Inhorn 2003). This does not mean that men do not carry stigma, since they too suffer from infertility and attempt to overcome it. However, in Muslim societies where discussions of sexuality are considered sensitive and often inappropriate (Wong 2012; Ussher et al. 2017), the underlying assumption in the case of a couple unable to produce offspring is that it is the fault of the woman (Dudgeon & Inhorn 2004; Inhorn 2012). Often more than not, 'male' infertility remains deeply hidden, which results in women 'carrying the burden' of infertility, whether actively to protect their husband's face (Inhorn 2012) or passively through social assumptions and gossip.

In short, Muslim women experiencing infertility face a unique dilemma that challenges their gender and sexual identities; questioning their femininity and worth as wives, and influencing their interpersonal relationships. As Olshansky (2003) argues, despite identity being multifaceted, shifting, and dynamic, the salience of the infertile-self pushes all other identities to the periphery, constructing one's social world as defined by infertility.

2.7 Research Questions

In light of the review detailed above the main research question for the present investigation is: *How do Muslim female bloggers discursively navigate and construct their identities following a diagnosis of infertility?*

¹⁰ The concept of a high birth rate or fertility rate describes an increased statistical supposition of having multiple children over the life-course of a woman. This is often correlated with a desire for children for social security, lack of access to contraceptives, stricter adherence to traditional religious beliefs, generally lower levels of female education, and lower rates of female employment in industry (World Fertility Report, 2015).

The exploration of this main question is supported by the following sub-questions:

- *What identities do infertile Muslim women construct for themselves and others in the process of telling stories about their infertility and, (in some instances) their journey to conception, and what motivates such constructions?*
- *How are individual and collective infertile blogging identities constructed in infertile Muslim women's narratives?*
- *What discursive strategies and linguistic tools do infertile Muslim women use to achieve these constructions, and, what management techniques do they use for integrating the components of self (for example, assimilation, resistance, accommodation, contestation, or reinterpretation) in the face of the freedoms and constraints seen in the social constructions of gender and religion?*

To answer these questions, this thesis examines the construction of Muslim women's identity(ies) in blogs by appropriating the small-story framework using Bamberg's (1997) theory of positioning, and Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) small-story approach to the study of identity in narratives. The study analyses infertile Muslim women's written narratives, using both a macro-level lens to look at social attributes and micro-level discourse analytical tools that explore syntactical features. It focuses on the process by which individuals construct their identities through discursive activities. As described by Bamberg & Georgakopoulou (2008) the study sets out to explore the 'how' of identity work¹¹ in infertile Muslim women's blogs, in order to answer the 'who am I?' question of identity.

¹¹ For a thorough discussion on the internal development of identity (the way the 'how' defines the 'I'), see Waterman 2015.'

2.8 Summary

This chapter reviewed existing literature concerning several key areas of importance to this study. First, the chapter began by reviewing the literature on identity from a social constructionist and post-structuralist perspective. It also described how the ‘narrative turn’ helped to view social reality as a lived experience. It discussed how this eventually led to a shift in focus from large, canonical-style narratives to smaller segments of talk that attend to dynamic and momentary shifts in identity construction.

In recognition of the diverse and growing literature on the construction of identity of subaltern groups, the review subsequently identified significant theoretical findings and positions with regard to the construction of gender and sexual identity. Known theories and exemplar studies investigating issues of performativity and intersectionality were reviewed. A discussion around sociocultural conceptions of Muslim culture and identity was presented, including considerations of the centrality of the mothering/motherhood experience for Muslim women; thus, making salient the intersecting variables that render infertility an identity dilemma.

The chapter also addressed social media as an outlet for identity presentation, particularly in relation to subaltern groups. A gap was identified with regard research on infertile Muslim women. It was argued that social media has provided a space for Muslim women to convey their thoughts, interpretations and positions on religious and social Discourses that, on occasion, constrain them. It argued that online spaces provide relatively ‘safe’ outlets which help women discover and negotiate their positions.

The review also examined the current literature on disclosure and authenticity online, arguing that personal blogs provide a space for the abbreviated presentation of identities in narratives. It specifically discussed social media as outlets for Muslim women’s identity

negotiation. This was, supported by a presentation of small-story research on social media, relevant to this study.

This study is therefore an attempt to begin to address the lacuna identified above by exploring identity constructions in narratives of Muslim women who blog about their infertile experiences and their attempts to become fertile. The chosen research methodology is now detailed in greater depth in Chapter Three, below.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology and procedures adopted for collecting, stratifying, sampling and analysing the data gathered. It provides the rationale for the choice of blogposts as data and provides necessary background on the infertility blogs and informants, and an account of the small story framework. The chapter ends with some reflections on the researcher's position in relation to analysing Muslim infertile (MIF) identities in blogs.

3.1 Rationale and Background

3.1.1 The research field.

Whilst many studies dedicated to the study of narrative constructions of identity have focussed on naturalistic conversational data arising from interviews, obtaining such data proved to be too difficult in the case of MIF women due to social, cultural and religious sensitivities. The dominant cultural and religious construction of Muslim women's sexual embodiment (discussed in Chapter Two) have made discussions around infertility limited and confined to private encounters, such as closed medical and social spaces. This is arguably due to the stigma and culturally loaded meanings of being infertile, which discourages personal disclosure outside of these circles. Therefore, first-hand accounts of experiences are very hard to find offline¹². The presence of these discussions online is also extremely limited, particularly when looking for 'Muslim' infertile groups, despite the abundant presence of Western infertility groups, websites and discussion forums. However, the few available

¹² The researcher was unable to locate Muslim infertility support groups. In addition, recruiting individual participants for interviews and engaging with medical service providers did not prove fruitful in providing rich narrative data, as participants were generally reserved and unwilling to participate.

online spaces/websites provide a unique and promising point of access into stories around the lived experiences of MIF women. Hence a decision was made to explore Muslim women's identity in infertility blogs.

Data in this study consists of archived narratives accessed from publicly available personal blogs. Personal blogs comprise unmediated storied accounts that are considered to be as authentic as naturally occurring speech (Giles et al. 2015). A study of self-presentation in these social media websites is promising, since these websites are exceptional spaces for women to write candidly about their experiences and offer reflections on their personal and social lives. Based on the view that self-presentation online integrates various kinds of personal information - private thoughts and social behaviour -(Ambady and Skowronski 2008; Back et al. 2010; Funder 1999; Hall and Bernieri 2001; Kenny 1994) (see section 2.4.1), these weblogs permit a discursive investigation of the way in which MIF women construct a sense of self as they confront socially-circulating *Discourses* and interactants' positioning of them in relation to normative assumptions about womanhood, motherhood and femininity. Further (brief) discussion of blogs, as a site of research interest and data resource, is provided below.

3.1.2 Background on blogs and informants.

Weblogs (see section 2.4.1 above) or 'blogs' consist of 'user (writer) generated data' (Hardey 2011) that is composed of written accounts, with features such as headings, paragraphs and captions, and other representations including images, icons, and hyperlinks to external online content¹³.

Blogs selected for this study take the form of interactive diaries¹⁴. In these blogs,

¹³ These features are highly dependent on the web-blogging platform used.

¹⁴ Interactivity means that the audience (readers) can comment on the content, adding a dialogical dimension to the narrations. Although these comments do not form part of the analysis, they consolidate our understanding of the audience at the second level of positioning in SS analysis.

‘posts’ form diary entries about individuals’ experiences/tellings. Each blog contains digitally archived posts, chronologically sequenced on a blogging platform¹⁵ and thematically organised by the blogger. These blogs consist of a number of posts, ranging in number from occasional to frequent – as per bloggers’ preference. Thus, the term ‘blog’ in this study is used to refer to one post, or to many by the same person. The entire data set consists of blogs written and administered by individual women who identify as Muslim, female and infertile or trying to conceive. Ten personal weblogs were selected for this study because they were blogs in which women reflected on their personal experiences and social life in relation to their journey towards conception, rather than writing generally about the issue of infertility.

As stated above, bloggers selected for analysis all define themselves amongst their online blogging communities as TTC (Trying To Conceive) or IF (Infertile) bloggers. They have built their blogs around a common purpose stated on the homepage (or the ‘about me’ section) of the blog, revolving around the need to share experiences and offer/receive support from other women in the TTC community. Through these blogs, women disclose personal stories and share their insights and knowledge with other women going through similar circumstances. Bloggers in this study live in different geographic locations including Western (UK and USA), Middle-Eastern (Kuwait, UAE), African (South Africa) and Eastern (Malaysia) home settings (see Table 1.1. below), thus creating a varied representation of Muslim culture, rather than a particular geographic or ethnic background.

Blogs examined in this thesis are categorically viewed as health-related self-help websites that focus on informing and interacting with others undergoing the same experience (Marcus et al. 2012; Oh et al. 2013). The blogging community is not typical. Its readers are not registered participating members in the same way as other online virtual communities or help groups that are specifically designed using current networked technology to form

¹⁵ A website that allows the creation and archiving of a blog through subscription.

communities (e.g. PatientsLikeMe.com, StupidCancer.org, Mumsnet.com, or groups on Facebook.com and Friendster.com, etc.). Blogs in this study form informally connected communities, linked to each other via the ways their participants use the technology to engage in dialogue (see Johnson 2001 for a similar investigation of a nontypical blogging community). That is to say that although each blog is an independent webpage authored by an individual person, each blog includes selected hyperlinks placed by their authors to blogs of similar interest/content, and their users follow each other's 'feed' and use a shared terminology/linguistic repertoire. IF blog authors address each other as a community, follow a certain protocol, and identify themselves as members.

3.2 Data Collection

The data set consists of a collection of 411 archived posts (see Table 1.1 below) from infertility related personal blogs, collected for the analysis of the blog's textual content (posts) using small story analysis. The corpus was retrieved over a period of ten months - from April 2016 to January 2017, although the length of posting extended beyond this period. The lengthy blogging period facilitated a longitudinal analysis of bloggers' reported experiences in relation to their 'infertility journey' over time.

The following reports on the stages undertaken in the identification, selection and analysis of the data. This includes initially gaining ethical permission for conducting the research, locating the data (blogs), and setting criteria for selection, categorization and sampling. This process is explained chronologically in subsequent sections.

3.2.1 Ethical considerations.

The use of blogs as a site for qualitative data collection and analysis poses unique ethical

challenges because of the persistence and ‘traceability’ (Beaulieu & Estalella 2012) of quotes, as well as the often sensitive content of the data gathered and therefore the potential impact on both individuals and online communities. In exploring the ethical issues associated with possible harm in virtual spaces, two main issues arise: the position of the researcher as active or passive, and the internet space being public or private (Eysenbach & Till 2001).

This study followed the ethics protocol of a body of clinical ethnography research on online illness blogs (Eastham 2011; Eysenbach & Till 2001; Heilferty 2009; 2011; Gubrium et al. 2014; Keim-Malpass et al. 2014; 2013; Keim-Malpass & Steeves 2012). As such, a decision was made to take on the role of passive investigator and analyse infertility blogs that were already in existence and located on public Internet sites (Keim-Malpass & Steeves 2012; Keim-Malpass et al. 2013). This decision was based on the study’s interest in a naturalistic inquiry to further understand the lived experience of Muslim women with infertility problems without any preconceived interview questions to elicit responses. This approach is in line with the discursive psychological and conversational analytical approaches that seek to understand subjectivity as an emergent and lived experience (Bamberg 1997, 2011). Such inquiry is also critical in understanding the presentation of self in terms of continuity and temporality, connecting different events in coherent renderings (over time). This meant that the data collection and analysis began at the time when the women were blogging about initial consultations and treatments and moved forward in time to the most recent blog postings. This method permitted exploration of the manner by which subjects displayed, countered and assumed positions for themselves and others in different contexts and at different stages of their infertility journey (up to 6 years for some women). This ranged from the time participants were diagnosed with infertility, through to treatment, and, for some, transitioning into motherhood through pregnancy adoption or surrogacy. In others, moving to positions of accepting childlessness. Posts also documented experiences

with different medical interventions, miscarriages, as well as reports of other setbacks and milestones along the way. (The latter is similar to stages of transition, as also reported in the case of illness blogs, e.g. see Keim-Malpass et al. 2013 on ‘blogging with cancer’).

In relation to the public vs. private space debate, the AoIR (Association of Internet Researchers) first guiding principle on online research (e.g. Holtz et al. 2012) distinguishes between more vulnerable private or semi-private online communities; such as health related self-help/private groups; and less vulnerable groups, who have ‘an outward focus aimed at informing non-members’ (Roberts 2015: 6). The data within this study was classified within the ‘open access’ category, since their content is part of the public data domain (see 3.1.3 above on the particularities of the blogs under investigation). Therefore, they are treated under the ‘fair dealing¹⁶’ intellectual property law. This law states that information under the category of fair dealing is licence-free (apart from copyright) and can be studied and reproduced for several identified purposes including research. Hence, unless blogs were protected by passwords or required membership for access purposes, they were considered suitable for data collection through search engines such as Google, Bing and Yahoo. No formal ethical permission or consent from either the platform in which blogs were initiated and stored, nor from the bloggers was sought.

In exploring the ethical issues associated with possible harm to vulnerable individuals or communities, it is important to be vigilant and address ethical considerations nonetheless. Such considerations need to extend beyond the procedural ethics involved in obtaining ethical approval for commencing research. Given the sensitivity of the content of these particular blogs and their personal nature, it was felt that there was a moral obligation to maintain privacy and ensure that there would not be any unfortunate consequences for

¹⁶ Fair dealing in United Kingdom law: a doctrine that provides an exception to United Kingdom copyright law, in cases where the copyright infringement is for the purposes of non-commercial research or study, criticism or review, or for the reporting of current events (Cornish, Llewelyn & Alpin 2010).

individual bloggers if they were identified. Above all, these blogs are sites where women can express opinions and views that are not sanctioned or may be stigmatized in their cultural milieu. It was considered appropriate therefore for this research to follow Sharf's (1999) suggestions and take extra measures to maintain bloggers anonymity by replacing all names with pseudonyms, with the exception of blogging names - nicknames - that have already been chosen by bloggers as measures of self-protection. These are pseudonyms that the bloggers do not use elsewhere on the web and could not be easily linked to them. These were identified either through their direct referent (lexical form), (e.g. 'Fertility Doll'; 'Almuslimah'), or when the blogger specifically stated that they were not using their real name. By preserving the blogging name in the analysis, both the author's privacy and right to credit are maintained (see Bruckman 2002; Hookway 2008). That being said, in most cases in the data, bloggers used proper names (i.e. names of persons) or reverted to posting anonymously (marked with an artistic (*) sign in Table 1.1 below). Since proper names could not be identified as authentically belonging to the individual or borrowed for blogging purposes, pseudonyms have been provided in all cases where proper names were used. Explicit name references made to other people in the posts were also concealed to ensure privacy.

Despite these measures, it has been noted that it is difficult to anonymise individual data extracts (i.e. segments of blogposts) when these are reproduced in publications and during presentations (Narayanan & Shmatikov 2008, 2009). Of particular concern is the republishing of quotes that have been taken from social media platforms and republished verbatim, as these can lead, via search engines, straight back to their original location, often then exposing the identity and profile of the social media user they originate from (BPA 2013). However, research suggests that blogger disclosures are intentional, and people are aware of the trade-offs between privacy versus developing recognizable online identities and followers through

repeated sharing of personal experiences (McCullagh 2008). Ultimately, this work deferred to the blog authors' stated requests on their blogs, when available, to cite/quote their work (or not to be quoted) as a guide for their level of inclusion in the reporting of results (Kurtz et al. 2017).

3.2.2 Collection procedure.

The process of locating potential blogs for analysis involved three search strategies. The first strategy involved consulting blog directories associated with the largest and most popular blogging platforms such as 'WordPress.', 'Tumblr.', and 'Blogger'. Then, search engines such as Google were used to locate blogs that were not available on the popular platforms mentioned above. Lastly, snowballing sampling technique¹⁷ was applied digitally, using links as referrals similar to the technique used by researchers in recruiting participants in fieldwork research. These are discussed in turn below.

Search tools offered by blogging platforms allow the searching of directories in order to identify relevant content. Searches were undertaken. The aim was to identify potential blogs relevant to the infertility community of practice (CofP)¹⁸ and then find Muslim bloggers within that community. A combination of key terms which are commonly used and found in glossaries of infertility websites and blogs¹⁹ such as 'infertility', 'TTC' [short for Trying to Conceive], 'multiple miscarriages', 'surrogacy', 'IVF' [In-Vitro Fertilisation]; along with

¹⁷ In its simplest formulation snowball sampling consists of identifying respondents who are then used to refer researchers on to other respondents (Atkinson & Flint 2001).

¹⁸ The term community of practice CofP is used here based on evidential networked interactive arrangement between bloggers. TTC/IF bloggers demonstrate all components of a virtual CofP, those being: (1) different levels of expertise that are simultaneously present; (2) fluid peripheral to center movement that symbolizes the progression from being a novice to an expert; and (3) completely authentic tasks and communication (Johnson 2001: 45).

¹⁹ Such as <http://www.pregnancy.org/article/trying-conceive-terms-and-acronyms>;
<https://yetanotherbitterinfertile.wordpress.com/ttcif-terms-decoded/>;
<https://www.fertilityfriend.com/Faqs/Common-Abbreviations.html>

different combinations of categorical identity descriptors of the target population/subjects, including ‘Muslim(ah)’, ‘Islam(ic)’, ‘women/an’ and derivatives of these words were used in the search. However, only a handful of blogs that met the criteria were found through blogging platforms. Search engines were then utilised to locate pages that were not part of the major blogging platforms. Search engines returned lengthy lists of blogs that covered various topics of interest, including fertility related information, articles and discussions on the topic. To narrow the results down, key term combinations using advanced search tools (e.g. placing phrases between inverted commas in the search box or using *allintext*: followed by key words, as in *allintext:muslim infertile blog woman*) revealed webpages where the key terms appeared in the body of the text. This process identified a number of web pages that would have gone unnoticed if only blogging directories were consulted.

Lastly, snowballing proved useful in detecting related blog pages. These were identified via links and mentions of other bloggers in the posts, including lists of suggested friends, hyperlinked²⁰ mentions of visitor’s names/ blog-spaces, and links offered in comments left by blog readers.

3.2.3 Selection procedure.

The search yielded 22 blogs that met the general criteria, i.e.: posts which were infertility related and written by (self-identified) female Muslim bloggers. However, not all of the blogs found were suited for the purpose of the research (as detailed below) and therefore further winnowing had to take place.

The next step was to refine the data set in relation to the research question. In order to be included, blogs needed to exhibit three vital characteristics:

²⁰ A hyperlink is a highlighted word or picture in a document or Web page that you can click on with a computer mouse to go to another place in the same, or a different, document or Web page.

- 1) The writer identifies as being female of Muslim faith.
- 2) The writer states she had gone through or is currently experiencing problems of infertility.
- 3) The blog follows a 'journal' style of written posts, primarily focusing on the woman's personal experiences whilst 'trying to conceive'.

Adhering to these criteria was not straightforward, as the variables were in many cases established via direct reference to identity ascriptions embedded within the narratives the women wrote about themselves. This level of selection required a manual examination of results lists and blog directories. Various combinations of search words revealed different lists, all requiring a close examination to locate potential blogs. Blogs that seemed promising were carefully surveyed to locate information on the professed gender and religion of the blogger and the purpose of the blog.

Twelve blogs were excluded since they used a mixture of English and another Asian language. Their inclusion was not feasible or practical within the limits of the study, especially given that the researcher was unfamiliar with the Asian language. Eight more blogs were discounted because of their focus on infertility articles, medical treatments and technologies, in addition to one blog which was mainly dedicated to supplications and religious motivational quotes. These blogs lacked narratives related to infertility and the personal journey of the blogger. The sample was thus narrowed down to a selection of ten blogs written in English.

The limited number of personal blogs (ten) is a reflection of the limited preponderance of Muslim women's personal 'blogs' when compared to similar blogs in other cultures²¹.

²¹ Compared to the hundreds or thousands of available Western infertility blogs (e.g. Infertility network UK <http://www.infertilitynetworkuk.com/information/blog>; The best infertility blog list <http://www.redbookmag.com/health-wellness/advice/inspiration-wellness/infertility-blogs?src=social-email>; 90+ infertility bloggers <http://www.amateurnester.com/2015/04/infertility-bloggers-2.html>)

3.2.4 The data set.

The following table presents basic information about the corpus and general information about each blogger:

Table 1.1 Data set of blogs

	Blog Title	Blogging Name/ *Pseudonym	Location	No. of posts	Avg. post length (words)	Time- of posting
1	A Muslimah's Infertility	*Farah	Undisclosed	4	453	16/01/2014-18/01/2014
2	Beyond What Ifs: A woman, an American, of Pakistani origin, of Muslim faith... Infertile	Writer *Leila	United States	15	936	11/03/2013-23/04/2014
3	Waiting for Miracles to Happen	*Eman	Malaysia	192	273	04/11/2010-12/10/2016
4	Infertile Muslim: A Muslim couple's journey facing male factor infertility with a view of how every difficulty comes with ease.	Infertile Muslim *Mona	Undisclosed	30	180	16/09/2011-11/01/2017
5	A Baba inshaAllah	Suki	Cape Town, South Africa	21	263	01/01/2014-10/02/2015
6	Learning Muslimah: Day to day, strength to strength, till the day I meet Him.	*Zahira	Malaysia	10	1280	01/12/2010-07/11/2012
7	Fertility Doll	*Nora	London, UK	151	471	14/04/2012-19/11/2016
8	PCOS or PCOD? Does it even make a difference...	Blogger Kuwait *Dalal	Kuwait	87	435	03/11/2012-20/11/2015
9	Heart of a Muslimah	Nomadic heart *Salam	Dubai, UAE	7	638	22/12/2009-28/07/2011
10	Arshe's perspective: Trying to find balance and perspective as a woman without children	Arche2020	New Jersey, United States	2	1967	12/11/2014

As described above, the data set consists of ten blogs by ten women living in different

geographic locations.

The corpus included a compilation of 519 posts in total (135000 words - 500 pages approx.). The number of posts ranged between bloggers. The largest blog in the data set was written over a six-year period and consists of 192 posts; the smallest blog had one 'about me' post and one long narrative. The disparity in the number of posts across subjects is marked (from 2 – 192). Bloggers with higher numbers of posts had recurrent postings written over a long period of time, which include short 'updates' on their life. Their blogs were updated more frequently, and the length of their posts were comparatively shorter on average (see Table 1 above for average length of post). This was not found in blogs that had fewer posts, where the blogger wrote less frequently but more elaborately about a topic. Two of the selected bloggers had active contributions, posting an average of 1-2 posts per month related to recent events. Others posted less frequently providing longer descriptive narratives about their journey as opposed to the short 'event' based updates.

Although all the selected blogs fell within the infertility theme, out of the 519 posts about 20% did not include narratives of experience (108). Bloggers posted a range of topics including humorous graphics and comics, religious supplications, resources for information, seasonal greetings, comments on news, recipes for hormonal balance and a varied scope of other issues. In spite of the important indexical meanings these textual and semiotic representations hold, the data was limited to the analysis of personal stories as informed by the research questions. This meant that 411 posts were selected and coded for analysis.

The blogging community is a type of illness related support network. Membership is not requested by registration or joining a 'site', but is based on displays of similarity. To become a member, one would create a personal blog page, and post about their experience with infertility, addressing a group of familiars, in this case the TTC (trying to conceive) online community. Although not sharing a unified platform (see section 2.4.1), bloggers

identify themselves and their readers with the label ‘trying to conceivers’, ‘TTCers’, or simply ‘infertiles’. This label is their membership passage, upon which they get acceptance and support. It also proposes that readers are assumed to be part of the same category as the writers (i.e. infertile). Thus, it would be safe to suggest that infertility blogs are written by infertile women for infertile women. This notion is not only reflected in the way readership is addressed, but also through linguistic realisation. Bloggers share a unified word bank of ‘TTC Jargon’, which is comprised of medical and social lexicon specific to IF journeys. This jargon forms part of the community’s language, a shared repertoire unique to the group. Its use has become standard practice amongst IF bloggers, that lists are made available for newer users to allow them to decipher the language of the group and build their own presence online. The act of blogging in itself, as described by women in the dataset, is used as a therapeutic tool and a way share common stories, thoughts and reflections, provide comfort and to receive and offer advice.

3.2.5 Further winnowing: selection of posts containing small stories.

Purposive²² sampling was employed to narrow down the selection of posts for in-depth narrative analysis. This sampling technique facilitates the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest, as per the objectives of the study (Palinkas et al. 2015; Silverman 2015). It allows the researcher to: 1) find instances that are representative or typical of a particular type of case on a dimension of interest; and 2) achieve comparability across different types of cases on a dimension of interest. Purposive sampling does not, however, entirely overcome the inherent unreliability of generalizing from small samples. Nevertheless, it attempts to counter this flaw by enabling researchers to

²² Maxwell defined purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which, “particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell 1997: 87).

choose the most appropriate cases for the intended framework and hence answer the research question.

Given the detailed narrative analysis required for the investigation of small stories, and with 411 posts to select from, a small but representative sample was required. The small story framework is premised on ethnographic modes of data identification and collection, and social interactional methods of analysis. Hence, there is no sampling method, nor specify methodological procedures or suggestions about data selection. All blogs were manually coded for analysis. However, representation remained an issue. For a representative sample, randomized case selection was trialled but proved to be unrepresentative of targeted narratives - both on the level of thematic content and storied life events, as posts varied greatly in their theme, focus and content. Further, common selection criteria practiced by linguistic research on online health communication which focuses on digital story-telling (Jaworska 2018; Jones 2010; Koteyko & Hunt 2016), suggests analysing first posts by each participant in the search for emerging patterns relevant to the studied phenomena. This method was also trialled but failed to capture ongoing and emerging identity performances and variations across time and context. To resolve this problem, the posts/stories which were selected for analysis included those which presented recurrent 'topics' throughout the blogs. These recurrent topics were stories about specific experiences that were most commonly identified through a close reading and coding of all posts. There was a common thread of themes 'recurrent topics' in bloggers narratives of experience. All blogs in our analysis included posts (or representations within posts) regarding:

1. Joining the TTC community. These are stories that establish the self as a member of the infertile community.
2. Storying a social event. These included references to or reflections on past, hypothetical or recent incidents.

3. Storying a medical event/ experience.
4. A story about the self in relation to a significant 'other'.
5. A story about the self in relation to the wider world (politics, society, religion, etc.).
6. Leaving the TTC community. These are stories that talk about the transition from infertility to pregnancy and how it is managed.

The six topics listed above emerged following an intensive coding process which identified emerging themes, trends, patterns, or conceptual categories (Strauss & Corbin 1990). The whole data set was searched repeatedly with an analytical eye, looking for elements relevant to the first level of positioning 'positioning in the tale world'. For this level of analysis, simple electronic aids²³ such as the 'search' facility on the computer, and 'CasualConc' concordance software (Fig. 1) were used to look for: 1- pronouns and other references to the self and to others, 2- religious references, 3- social accounts and references, 4- medical references including terminology, treatments, mentions of doctors and any other relevant references to the medical experience. These tools permitted a more rigorous approach to identifying word patterns and thematic representations in the text.

Results were colour coded according to the abovementioned four categories, permitting a visual representation of their occurrences, and making them easy to identify and locate.

²³ The use of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) packages, e.g. NUD*IST, NVivo and ATLAS/ti, were considered for data analysis but decided against as they failed to identify less obvious elements/references as per the small story framework (e.g., embedded references, metaphors, etc., see Section 3.2.1).

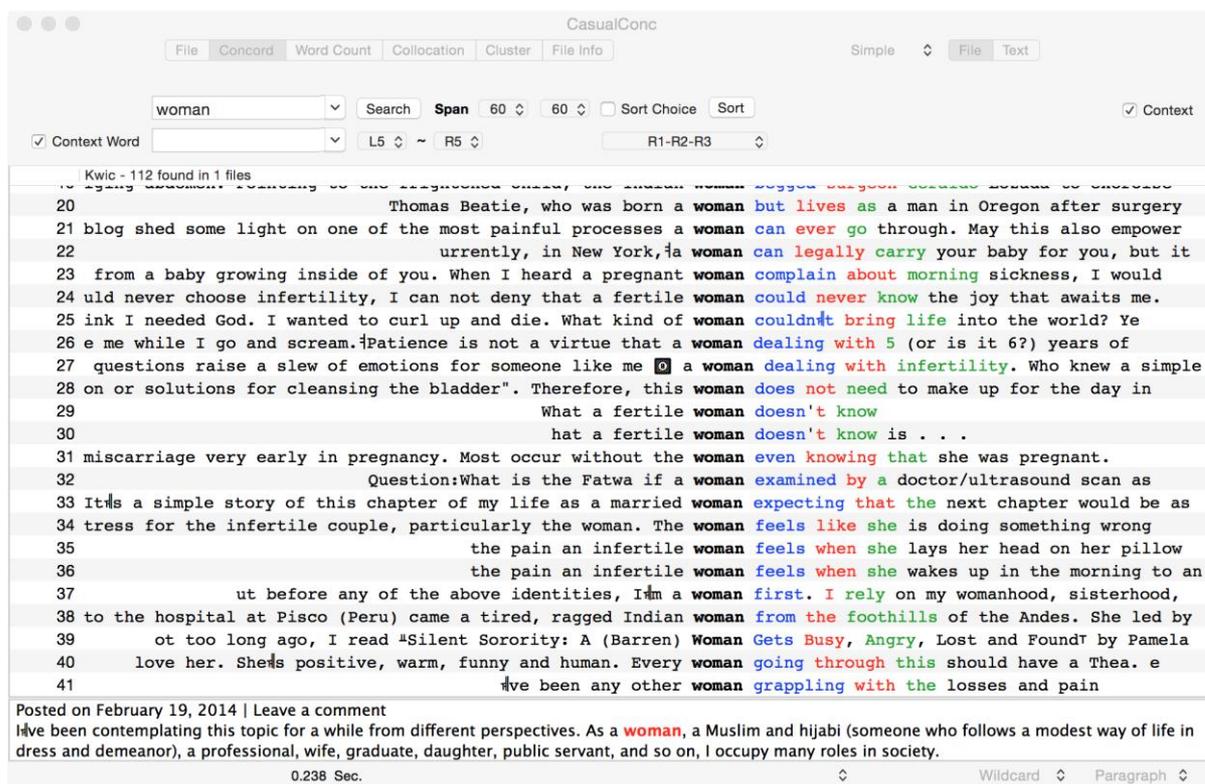


Fig. 1.1 A search result of the noun reference ‘woman’

The process of thematising the content was reinforced by further analytical notes in the margins, where reflections, thoughts and discursive tools were marked and annotated. These included noting instances of self/other representations, audience positions, and meta-discourses mentioned in the narrative. Additionally, notes on dilemmatic positions of selves were taken, where instances of ‘world-to-person’ vs. ‘person to world’ were noted, as well as positions of time, change, stability, agency, control and sameness/difference creating a highly important reference later on (as discussed in section 2.3.1, detailed further in section 3.3 below).

Accordingly, decisions on selection (why these particular posts and not others) were guided by both the theoretical framework and research questions. Small stories were not meant to rest on prototypical textual criteria, but to include storying specific social moments to allow the exploration of how the self and other are constructed and positioned on particular

occasions and in particular settings. The main aim was to enable a local and situated understanding of discourses and recognise social consequentiality of discourse activities (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008). Therefore, the selection did not favour traditional canonical narratives, where bloggers provided long descriptive autobiographical stories of their experience, but focused on small stories about very recent (or still unfolding) events and reflections, embedded within bigger narratives or told separately.

Comments made by blog readers were found in three out of the total number of blogs. These were not equal in the level of interaction, as only one had active and regular contributions by readers. Although analysed initially as part of the second level of positioning, the small and limited number of interactions to one particular blogger was thought to compromise the study's objective of understanding infertility-related lived experiences through narrative. Such aim required a cross-examination of a larger number of accounts. Hence, it was decided against the inclusion of comments into the analysis. Similarly, the analysis of semiotic features such as images, emoticons and links to other platforms, and social presence on other platforms were excluded because of wide disparities in their use amongst bloggers in the data.

Textual data (stories) were then exposed to the three-level positioning analysis (Bamberg 1997, see section 2.3.1 above) from which salient extracts were selected. This amounted to a large set of comprehensive and extensive qualitative analysis. This analysis included an identified selection of representative posts that resulted from coding the data (as explained above). It included an investigatory thorough detailed analysis of the first seven posts by the high frequency bloggers in the data set: Mona, Dalal, Nora and Suki (total 28 posts). Seven posts in the case of these blogs yielded saturated and repetitive findings. In addition, the first post of all other blogs was also analysed. This exploratory analysis aimed at exploring emerging positioning constructions, linguistic patterns and repetitive *Discourses*.

Although disregarded in the presentation of analysis and results in this thesis, comments and multi-modality were also analysed at this stage to draw out cues of various subject positions. The micro level observations resulting from this analysis was deemed necessary given this study's framework to consolidate initial thematic representations. This analysis permitted tracking various positionings of self and other, highlighting linguistic strategies and their discursive aims, and cross comparing espoused *Discourses*, subtle and shifting positioning strategies and various identity enactments.

Nevertheless, given the limitations of word-count and to enable a focused presentation of the findings, a decision was made to present one representative case study in the results chapters below, with additional posts drawn from other women's posts in order to further consolidate the analysis and enable comparisons to be made. The main case selection has been made based on its representation, reflecting most of themes that ran through other blogs. Consolidating cases included '*Confirming and disconfirming*' stories. This meant additional excerpts were deliberately incorporated to offer examples that either confirm or counter the trend to add richness, depth and credibility (Palinkas et al. 2015). This sometimes included adding samples and brief excerpts from the corpus to generate 'saturated' information on the research questions (i.e., obtaining a comprehensive understanding by continuing to sample until no new substantive information is acquired Huberman & Miles 2002).

In terms of the presentation of the small stories in the analysis, each post (main and consolidating cases) are worked through the three-level positioning framework (see section 3.3.2 below). The discussion of results is presented in three chapters to capture recurrent topics in the data (see above). The presentation of analyses in these chapters is not comprehensive, but comes from a larger and much detailed descriptive work that has been refined to a great extent to enable a clear presentation of findings. The first chapter looks at initial posts written when women join the IF community, most of which revolve around the

‘diagnosis’ stage of their infertility journey. The second chapter presents posts from the middle stage of the journey, mainly discussing medical and social experiences. The third and last discussion chapter looks at closing posts, written as women reach a resolution to their journey and post to inform readers that they are leaving the TTC community. It is worth pointing out at the end of the data collection period, some bloggers were still in the middle stage of the journey and did not reach a resolution. This study has chosen to focus on cases (Mona and bloggers similar to her) who have produced closing posts, to allow for the presentation of identity across time in relation to the transitions in the infertility journey.

In terms of presentation, the discussion follows a writer-to-analysis direction of fit, rather than analysis-to-writer, thus offering a worked-through analysis (see Gale et al. 2013), rather than working it through in the analysis chapters for a more focussed presentation. In this manner, the discussion summarises the findings without reporting the micro-analysis of all the posts in detail. It should be noted that posts are denoted by a particular reference arrangement: Post title, name of blogger, name of blog, date. This arrangement is followed throughout the analysis chapters and the appendices. Additionally, posts are presented as they originally appeared, including such features as ungrammatical constructions, and choice of paragraphing. This can often be part of the narrator’s style and is a characteristic of the storyteller, which should ideally be preserved. No translation has been carried out, as posters often define and explain Arabic religious terminology. For purposes of clarity, necessary corrections, abbreviations and terminology used by bloggers are explained in square brackets.

3.3 Analytical Framework

3.3.1 Theoretical assumptions and research tools.

This study uses Positioning Theory as an analytical tool in investigating subjectivity through small story accounts. The ontological assumptions of Positioning Theory are based on the

constructionist assumption that the social is constituted through discourse, and that to gain knowledge of, understand, and explain social phenomena one has to investigate the specific societal *Discourses* that constitute those phenomena. In small stories, the storytellers, audiences, and the situation a story occurs in, reflect the ‘underlying cultural-historical fabric’. The ‘broader cultural set of fundamental discursive orders’ linked to locally occurring phenomena need to be taken into account to gain a deeper understanding (Brockmeier & Harré 1997: 266).

As for what constitutes a small story in this study, some posts fulfilled prototypical definitional criteria of small fragmented tellings, ‘i.e. momentary and fleeting shifts into narrativity’, (see Section 2.3.1 above), whilst others comprised big canonical narratives, that are not usually analysed using a small story framework. A point to argue here is that attention to small stories stems from a reaffirmed belief in the importance of the communicative ‘how’ of identity analysis (e.g., chapters in DeFina, Schiffrin & Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou 2006, see section 2.4.2 above). The prime interest of identity investigations is placed on the details of talk (including storytelling), through which identities can be inflected, reworked, and more or less variably and subtly invoked (e.g. see chapters in Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). In this sense, current trends in narrative analysis posit an empirical and productive necessity to make boundaries less sharp with regards to what a narrative is (see discussion in Bamberg’s 2007b). Hence, this study follows the ‘new narrative turn’ to narrative analysis, applying a micro-analytical, multilevel, small-story approach to the investigation of identity in stories. As noted previously, this is achieved through applying a three-level analytical framework, detailed in the subsequent section.

3.3.2 Small story positioning framework.

The small story framework was appropriated for the analysis of the data (section 2.3.1

above). The model devised by Bamberg & Georgakoupoulou (2008) proposes three analytical levels for the examination of positioning, designed to capture identity work in conversational discourse. It focuses on narrative practices operating on moment to moment situated identity performances as they unfold in the tellings of the narrator, focusing on various positions on the level of the story, the interaction, and the self (as presented in earlier work of Bamberg: 1997, ; 2004, 2007, 2008). This framework involves:

Positioning Level 1 Analyzing positioning in the tale world: *‘How characters are positioned within the story?’*, and *‘How the characters in the story are positioned in relation to each other and in space and time?’*
Bamberg, (1997: 337)

At this level, linguistic means are scrutinised in relation to which characters are established in the story world. It explores the various positions/identities women referentially and indexically claim for themselves and ascribe to others, and the way these positions are constructed in the story (e.g. as passive subjects or active agents, victims of biology and fate or as accepting Muslims, etc.). This level explores the content through fine-grained discourse and linguistic analysis looking at representations of characters; event sequences; and how they relate to social

categories discursively (Bamberg 2004: 6).

Positioning Level 2 Explores positioning as interaction in the narration:
‘How the speaker/narrator positions herself (and is positioned) within the interactive situation?’
(Bamberg 2008: 385)

This level looks at positioning as an interactional accomplishment between the narrator as teller in the here-and-now in relation to the interlocutors (the target/ imagined audience). This level explains why the story was told at that particular point in the narrative, in relation to narrator-audience positions, looking at ‘small stories’ occasioned by situated discursive concerns and embedded in interaction (e.g. justifying actions, blaming, seeking and giving advice etc.) (Deppermann 2013: 6)

Positioning Level 3 Explores how the narrator answers the ‘who-am-I’ question: *‘How the speaker/narrator positions a sense of self/identity with regard to dominant Discourses or master narratives?’* (Bamberg 2008: 391)

This level traces acts of identity established in the first and second level of positioning and looks at their individual sense-making strategies. In other words, the analysis interprets the fine linguistic elements that resulted from exploring ‘what the story is about’ and ‘How do I want to be understood by you, the audience’ (Bamberg 2004: 6) and uses them to access narrators positions of self/identity in relation to dominant discourses or master narratives through which these positions were constructed. Hence, the focus becomes interpreting characters’ positions vis-à-vis cultural Discourses and normative (social) positions, by embracing them or displaying neutrality, or by distancing, critiquing, subverting, and resisting them.

Although merit has been found in focusing on the third level of positioning to investigate the discourse that influence and affect identity construction (e.g. See De Fina 2013), the analysis of the first and second levels of positioning in this study are seen as necessary to reveal embedded discursive positions that would otherwise be dismissed by going through the third level alone. Thus, the three levels in the model are cumulative in nature, and interwoven at each stage, facilitating a rich and deep understanding of positioning at various levels of ‘telling’.

It should be noted that there are several theoretical debates/arguments around third level of positioning. The first is related to assumptions this level makes regarding the stability

and coherence of identity, which contradicts with postmodern understandings of identities as multiple, temporary, fragmented and conflicting, (see Deppermann 2013). Second, opponents of PT question the identification of *Discourses*, arguing against the essentiality of master narratives or discourses that are ‘readily available’ for subjects to assume. In response, it should be stated that the underlying theory of positioning and small story analysis (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) calls for the empirical investigation of agentive positioning, acknowledging the synchronic, interactionally situated, temporary and negotiated construction of identities, juxtaposed against a more coherent and stable diachronic sense of self. This is especially realised in the second level of positioning in small story, where the local interactional fragmentary and co-constructed self-contradictory and subject to conflicting interpretations positioning of self and other is emphasised. view *Discourses* as fragmentary (see De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2015 for a discussion). As for the identification of *Discourses*, small story analysis does not suppose that discourse determines subject positions, as much as the active interaction and the co-construction/negotiation of positions and actions that talks ‘*Discourses*’ into being (Heritage & Clayman 2010), thus facilitating their identification.

3.4 The Researcher’s Reflexive Position

This study is concerned with exploring women's subjectivities and positions of self/other from a post-structuralist and social constructionist standpoint. As any qualitative research seeking to understand women’s presentation of self, (concerned to give meaning to their voices), it is vital to be aware of the researchers’ personal motivations, her social and cultural identities and the impact these factors have on the interpretation of the data in the process of inquiry.

Initially, the inquiry on which this study is based was motivated by a very personal narrative. In 2012, I had discovered an unplanned pregnancy at a critical career transitioning

period, making it an issue that I was struggling to accept and unable to reject due to my personal faith. At the same time, my youngest sister was going through the pains and disappointments of a fifth miscarriage after eight years of trying to conceive. In face of the contrasting interests, yet similar positions in terms of the trials we were going through, I could not help but notice how the conversation between us moved from the personal to the cultural and the worldly and back; bridging feelings of shame and pain, desire and guilt, with master discourses of God's will and tests in life to ease each other's suffering. As an applied linguist, such *Discourses* prompted both fascination and curiosity. It was an unexplored area that necessitated an inquiry to shed light on a minority within a religious community that views procreation as the most important objective of a marriage.

Although seen as a source of inspiration and a key into understanding a particular community of practice, being a member of the Muslim culture as a researcher brought with it a number of challenges and opportunities. This positionality undoubtedly had an influence on the research at all levels, from the outset in terms of motivations for undertaking this research, to the interpretive repertoire (Potter & Wetherell 1988, 1998) used in the analysis and findings. The macro-cultural frame of reference, as a person of Arabic-heritage, formed an overarching cultural identity that may have overlooked minute cultural positions that were part of the diverse ethnic and geographical background in the data, those which include not only single ethnic origins such as South African and Indonesian, but compound ethnic/cultural positions such as Arab-American and Pakistani-British subjects. Through reflecting on the interplay of my introspection (Roger et al. 2018) as a researcher, that is a reflexive reading of my shifting, dynamic, fluid, ongoing entity: 'who am I as a researcher' in relation to the outcome of the analysis 'how did I come to that understanding?' (Roger et al. 2018), a reliance and insight based on my own Islamic background formed a 'thread through the beads', linking women's identities to the researcher's cultural framework. It is

acknowledged that as a Muslim from Bahrain my understanding of other national contexts is limited. However, in my defence few posts made reference to national issues and cultural impositions that did not resonate with my personal experiences. Their narratives replicated issues that were common in the wider Muslim community than particular to their own cultures.

Hence, the position taken as a researcher was not as an objective entity, but one actively influencing the analysis and findings based on the data and my personal interpretations and insights. Being an insider-researcher (defined as the study of one's own social group or society - Naples 2003: 46) even though I do not belong to an infertile group, my cultural and gender-based affiliations with the participants enabled me to have *a priori* intimate knowledge of the community and its members. This knowledge guided the positions I took in the interpretation of the texts that were relative to the cultural values and norms of both the researcher and participants (Merriam et al. 2001). Although discourse analysis and social constructionist perspectives acknowledge that researchers cannot be (and do not intend to be) 'objective', and that one's own socialisation influences the interpretation of findings (Burr 2018), an impartial reading was sought in the shape of repeated visits to the texts and cross-interpretations from friends and family. These were three people, a male and two females from Muslim backgrounds that were alternately consulted during the process of analysis. The consultation was executed systematically (every third post) for inter-rater reliability, where interpretations and understandings were discussed to reach a consensus on the most valid interpretation, given the particularities of the text and contextual clues available within it. This aimed at minimising the influences of pre-existing or limited interpretations of the context.

3.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the methods used for the collection, selection and analysis of the data. Methodological and ethical decisions involved in the collection of the data were described, including a presentation of the three-step analytical procedure involved in the collection and selection of the data. A total corpus of 411 narrative posts by ten female bloggers was collected and used for data winnowing. Since the small story framework does not provide detailed selection criteria, the researcher appropriated purposive sampling techniques for data reduction. As detailed above, the small story framework takes a micro and macro approach to the investigation of identity construction in narratives. Its application to stories of infertility by Muslim women is discussed in the following results chapters.

Chapter Four: Results

Constructing the MIF World

4.0. Introduction

This chapter is the first part of three analysis chapters. Mindful of the centrality of the linear stages of the infertility journey (diagnosis/realisation of IF – treatment/coping- end management) suggested by the data, these chapters look at MIF women’s communicative accomplishments at each stage.

This chapter is dedicated to exploring the way in which Muslim women construct their identities and stances towards infertility at the early stages of diagnosis. By analysing the positions MIF women occupy and/or the positions they place others in, the analysis reveals how narrators implement social, religious and medical *Discourses* relevant to them in order to: positively or negatively frame their experiences to advocate their stances/arguments; construct categories of inclusion/exclusion and call for solidarity and alignment; and establish their own understanding of norms to advocate positions that are consistent with their desired selves.

The first section of the analysis chapters present Mona’s story as the main case study. This is then followed by another section that presents cross-sectional data – namely stories told by two more bloggers. The aim is to complement and contrast with stories told by Mona, thus affording a broader and more representative analysis of the larger data set. All analyses are presented through a three-level analysis following Bamberg and Georgakopoulou’s positioning framework (Bamberg 1997; Bamberg 2004; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008).

4.1 On Being MIF: Mona’s Story

Mona’s story presents a normative and recurring example of how Muslim women define and

negotiate their experience of infertility at the early stages of their diagnosis. She reports on her reaction to the IF diagnosis after seeking medical help. Her infertile self is positioned in relation to the medical *Discourse* and to other characters in the story world. Through this positioning she seeks sympathy from her readers and tries to find purpose. To achieve these goals, she calls upon available religious and social *Discourses* that support the positions she constructs for herself and others. The way she manages this positioning and identity construction is detailed in the following analysis.

Excerpt 1: *How We've Dealt With Our Infertility*, Mona, Infertile Muslim, Oct 13 2011

1 *Having infertility flung at you can be quite a shock. Even though we were unprepared to get*
2 *the MFI [Male Factor Infertility] diagnosis, I think because of our personalities and faith, we*
3 *weren't going to let our lives be torn apart by it.*
4 *In the initial stages one's first reaction to infertility may possibly be the question "why us?"*
5 *There were moments, when caught up in the emotions of it all, that we asked this but before*
6 *spiraling out of control we learnt to accept the divine qadaa (decree) and qadr (destiny) that*
7 *Allah TA²⁴ as put out for us. Our focus was on the positive and the aspects of our lives that*
8 *we had control of.*
9 *Our greatest therapy thus far has been striving to be the best Muslims we can be. Mostly in*
10 *remembrance of our creator but also in service to our community. Whether it's by assisting*
11 *soup kitchens, teaching little ones how to read Qur'an or generally being there for someone*
12 *else in need. No matter how difficult a situation you think you may be in, there's always*
13 *someone in a position more dire that you can help, regardless of how humble your gesture.*

²⁴ Ta'ala (Arabic: The glorified).

14 *Everyone's different. The way we've dealt with our situation has worked for us. Our*
15 *relationship becomes better when we work together while aiding others.*
16 *We do still have our own worries and concerns, but our outlook when we started IVF [In*
17 *Vitro Fertilisation] was a little more relaxed and placing our faith in whatever is in God's*
18 *will. Whatever must be, will be.*

4.1.1 Level 1: Positioning of characters in the story world and their relationality.

This level looks at the construction of characters in the story world. It identifies the main characters and the positioning cues used by the blogger at the story level. This is achieved through a linguistic investigation. At the level of language, common features associated with vocabulary (e.g. word choices and their indexicality such as the use of jargon or community specific lexical items, verbs and adjectives being formal or colloquial, etc.) are particularly revealing. In addition, grammar (tense choice and auxiliary verbs, e.g. active vs. passive) highlights arguments, judgments and positions bloggers take. Pronouns are particularly useful in identifying characters and their positions, such as the way the protagonist is constructed in relation to the antagonists. Further, rhetorical literary features (e.g. metaphors, similes, idioms, quotes/proverbs/excerpts from other sources, hyperboles, irony, rhetorical questions...etc.) bring to the fore significant implications embedded within complex constructions, and aid in enhancing certain associations made through specific statements. The analysis below showcases how this is achieved.

In excerpt 1 above, the main characters are Mona and her husband. She uses the inclusive first-person pronouns “we”, “us”, and “our” in presenting the couple as unified in the face of the diagnosis. Other characters in her telling include a generic mention of *others in need* in their community (line 10), amongst whom are ‘little ones’, that the couple teach

the Qur'an to. There is also mention of God or *Allah*, who she presents as an agentive persona, invoked rhetorically to provide reasoning and support following the couple's diagnosis of infertility.

Mona begins her story with an explanation about how the couple perceived and reacted to their diagnosis. She then moves on to describe their lack of agency in this world-to-person dilemma, and how this resulted in their subsequent actions, which were motivated by faith. Her narrative argues for the adoption of a therapeutic approach to dealing with the diagnosis, by looking outward from the couples' situation to satiating the needs of others.

The initial description presents infertility within a medical frame (*"MFI [Male Factor Infertility] diagnosis"* line 2). She describes the diagnosis as an inert object (*"Having infertility flung at you"* line 1), encountered and imposed suddenly without invitation. Her statement suggests a world-to-person subject positioning. The word *"flung"* and the consequent descriptive adjectives *"shock"* and *"torn"* (lines 1-3) are evaluative indexicals (Wortham 2001) that are associated with the negative experience of receiving infertility diagnosis. The adjectives connote unexpected movement, physical force and an emotional response. Infertility is denoted as a solid object thrust involuntarily upon her/the couple. Their position is powerless and defenceless. The couple's feelings are visceral rather than rational or reflective (*"when caught up in the emotions of it all [...] spiraling out of control"* lines 5-6). Through the use of passive constructions, Mona silences any reference to agency, avoiding the assignment of blame and placing the attention on the act (i.e. the experienced feelings) rather than the actor. Indeed, the cause of infertility and the person responsible has to be inferred in Mona's account by reference to the diagnosis of *"Male Factor Infertility"*. This medical verification indirectly indexes the cause of the couple's infertility - her male partner. She chooses not to name or indeed blame him directly however, but rather refers to their condition as a joint trial. Hence, the co-joined identity construction of the 'couple' is

used to index aligned stances and responsibilities, which she and her husband take towards the diagnosis.

The sequencing of events in the story is presented according to the different stages the couple pass through as they come to terms with the news of infertility. After the initial imposed and chaotic shock, the couple arrive at a more assured positioning and religious sensibility. She describes this as a gradual movement from the passive experiential situation of being “*flung at*” with an infertility label, and movement towards a position of awareness, then ‘transitory’ acceptance of the outcome (as they hold on to faith in God and the future, line 17). The cognitive verb ‘think’ that she uses to explain their acceptance in “*I think because of our personalities and faith...*” (line 2-3) is a form of ‘elastic language’ (Zhang 2015) that works to index a subjective and reflective (cognitive) stance that serves to distance itself from the initial affective reaction/stance taken as the couple navigate their path towards acceptance of the diagnosis. Although she interprets the couple’s change of stance in relation to their personalities and religious ideology, she stresses that this involves progressing along a rocky road of challenges, both emotional (“*when caught up in the emotions of it all*” line 5) and social “*let our lives be torn apart by it*” (line 3). The latter alluding to the damaging effect infertility can have on individuals and their marriages. She nonetheless proudly positions herself and her husband as overcoming these through rational thought and faith.

Mona positions herself in relation to others who get pregnant without difficulty. The question “*why us?*” (line 5) establishes an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy, which implies that the couple have been specially selected for this trial. Although the rhetorical question implies an initial questioning of God’s will, she mitigates this in her subsequent explanation. Using a temporal frame she conveys movement from initial shock to acceptance, implying that the initial reaction (“*one’s first reaction*” line 5) is a reaction normally experienced by infertile couples “*In the initial stages*” (line 4) and “*There were moments[...] that we asked this*”

(line 5). Irrationality and objection are also mitigated using modal verbs of probability (in “*may possibly be*” line 4) and is also related to the instability of emotions (in “*when caught up in the emotions*” line 5). The complex mitigating strategies, managed through a cluster of clauses in the preceding example and other forms of ‘elastic language’ (Zhang 2015), work well to alleviate any potential attacks on her religious position as a Muslim woman.

From this extensive identity work Mona rationalises how she manages to suppress this ‘understandable but harmful’ objection to God’s decree through positions of reflection and religious faith. Initially, she argues for an alternative position of compliance to God’s will “*but before spiralling out of control we learnt to accept the divine qadaa*” (lines 6-8). This enabled her to move from an undesirable/socially ‘frowned upon’, (by measures of religious sensibilities) “*out of control*” position, to a positive (“*learnt to accept*”) reflective stance. The metaphor of “*spiralling out of control*” includes indexical meanings of indirection, and possible harm, and allows her to form a contrast with her subsequent more positive/desirable position of ‘*accept*’ance and compliance. The temporal dimension (marked by the phrase “*but before*”) works to portray contrasting positions and available choices that the couple are consciously and agentively navigating through - and in the former case, away from. As such, Mona’s character is constructed as a rational persona but also humane; subject to the emotional trials of infertility but finally able to rationally embrace a more favourable reflective-religious perspective/choice.

Mona negotiates agency over her life course by adopting a positive stance towards the problem. In describing how the couple’s focus “*was on the positive and the aspects of our lives that we had control of*” (line 8), she incorporates different situations/positions/components/roles of her life that are available to her, besides having children. They enable Mona to present her character as proactive (lines 12-15). Interestingly, these alternative roles to maternity are also presented as being in line with God’s will. This

enables her to challenge normative constructions of successful marriages that limit success to procreation, and to assign responsibility for their infertility to a higher (and respected) order.

The destructive effects of infertility on marriages is referenced early on in her account, in lines 2-3 - "*we weren't going to let our lives be torn apart by it*" The deleterious effects of infertility are therefore refuted and challenged in a display of powerful defiance and determination. She notes how the couple constructed alternative roles for themselves. She presents the role of helping others as "*therapy*" (line 10), an alternative 'controllable' solution that allows her to shift to a more positive outlook and manage her new situation. She provides examples of roles in society that prove 'therapeutic' constructing the couple as religious 'good Muslims' and as active contributors to their community "*Whether it's by assisting soup kitchens, teaching little ones how to read Qur'an or generally being there for someone else in need.*" (lines 12-13). Positions of help enable Mona to construct herself as less pitiful and more agentic and self-sacrificing, given her ability to give to those who are less fortunate than her. The social-contributions she illustrates imply being blessed and more fortunate than others, and renders her suffering as less serious than many others who are deprived of basic needs.

The construction of the couple's shared social roles in the narrative serve to convey a strong marital bond between herself and her husband ("*Our relationship becomes better when we work together while aiding others*" line 20). The word "*better*" implies moving the relationship forward in solidarity, crediting this *better-ness* via the couple's social contributions and their help of others. In addition, the claimed inner peace that she feels ("*relaxed*" line 19) arising from their social morality consolidates this marital solidarity. These constructions imply an idealistic position of 'self' based on the adoption of a 'high moral ground', a position that could pose a threat to her credibility and appear far-reaching and unreal to her readers who are experiencing similar suffering. Mona acknowledges and

mitigates against this reading by stating that the couple “*still have [their] own worries and concerns*” (line 21). She constructs *worries* as a progressive state that becomes *better* with time and determination. This alludes to a restitutive narrative (Frank, 2013), which describes efforts people with illnesses take to create continuity or to ‘reorient’ themselves in a way that reconstructs their personal life histories. Through these restitutive narratives, individuals uncover means of interpreting their illness, and re-establish the relationship between the self, the world and our bodies in a positive manner (Frank, 2013). Through reconstructing her life story, Mona processes her infertility problem in a way that is getting her life back to normal. Nevertheless, ‘*still having their worries*’ (line 21) is brought in to mitigate against assumed self ‘idealism’, a strategy that helps make her claims more accessible to the infertile audience that she is addressing (see level 2 below).

Mona’s story manoeuvres dual claims to the self: an infertile identity that works to show empathy with the audience by bringing in stories of suffering; and the Muslim woman who finally accepts infertility and works her life around it. She employs her storying techniques to construct and protect this complex persona, allowing positive displays of self through the stances she takes as a Muslim woman and as infertile. She acknowledges the hardship of acceptance and the multiplicity of character, alongside possible other interpretations that may be held by her audience towards infertility (“*Everyone’s different*” line 16). She further reinforces the solidarity and unity between her husband and herself (“*The way we’ve dealt with our situation has worked for us*” line 19). These constructions develop a persona of both an infertile woman (or couple) but also an accepting Muslim who positively perceives the agency of the divine by choosing to please Him and give back in a selfless manner to her community.

4.1.2 Level 2: Positioning of the narrator with respect to the audience.

This level of analysis looks at how Mona positions herself in relation to the audience. It focuses on how her choice of linguistic forms and performance features serve to design positions in relation to the TTC (trying to conceive) online community that she is addressing. Although the potential readers are diverse and large (millions of internet users), bloggers usually address an ‘imagined community’ of readers who also read/write blogs because of a shared background/interest. Further, blogging (as women in the dataset describe it in many instances) is considered a type of therapy through which they share their stories and provide comfort and support for each other. Mona takes on this role by positioning herself as an ‘advice-giver’ and the audience as ‘advice-receivers’. To achieve this, she calls upon shared experiences to construct events, align with the readers and highlight implied normative Discourses that are relevant to this particular CofP. The way this is linguistically and discursively managed is explored below.

Mona offers her readers insights into her ‘therapeutic’ approach to infertility. She takes on an affiliative stance constructing her readership on the basis of shared mutual understanding through multiple complex constructions. She manages this initially by indexing her infertile position through the news of her diagnosis and through the use of medical and TTC jargon such as *MFI* and *IVF*. Abbreviations like these are used without clarification as they are considered part of the CofP community’s discourse. A shared repertoire affords a ‘presumed’ interactive accomplishment that the medium (blogs) does not actually allow (Baumer et al 2008, see section 2.4.1 above), which is useful in establishing Mona’s IF position, and aligning her with other women in the TTC CofP. In addition, Mona indexes affiliation through using the pronouns “*our*” and “*we*” in the telling of events. She directly ventures into the story details using these pronouns which imply an assumed prior knowledge of the characters, and proposes a certain level of acquaintance in the blogger/reader relationship. She achieves this affiliation through the use of synthetic

personalization (Fairclough 2001) i.e. “*having infertility flung at **you** can be quite a shock*” (line 1) and “*no matter how difficult a situation **you** think **you** may be in*” (line 13). Here she implicitly addresses individual readers and draws them in to her story. Moreover, through the way Mona mitigates her participative act with elastic language in “*I think because...*” (line 2), her readers are invited to co-evaluate her position, which implies a collaborative narrative activity. The symmetrical relationship between the blogger and her readers is continually emphasised through many means. Through her choice of words, the shared experiences of infertility and suffering that she calls upon, and the presumed unified stances towards infertility (e.g. “*shock*”), readers are invited to partake in her world by reflecting on their own stories and experiences of IF medical subjectification. This inclusive positioning places Mona’s contribution (advice) as coming from an epistemic stance as an experienced ‘insider’ (i.e. an in-group member). The readers are, in turn, constructed as qualified to receive the therapeutic advice proffered.

At a different level, Mona works to establish rapport with her audience by being very open about the couple’s response to diagnosis and their current feelings. A stance of openness is constructed to award her credibility and aid her argument about how one should adapt to infertility through different means. Before sharing the details of her story/’journey’, she makes reference to her affective reaction to her diagnosis “*having infertility flung at you...*” to invoke sympathy and alignment to her self-disclosure. Assumed shared IF experiences with the blogging TTC community enable her to disclose intimate details of her life and emotions that would not be easily shared off-line (e.g. discussing male factor diagnosis in conversations with unknown others). Her sharing of the intimate details of her reaction and raw emotional (couple-related) turmoil to a group of online ‘friends’²⁵ (e.g. “*our lives be*

²⁵ The expression ‘online friends’ in this thesis refers to relationships formed on the basis of mutual interest and sustained through the Internet via computer or online service.

torn” (line 3), *“there were moments”* (line 5) and *“we still have our worries”*(line 12)) display typical but usually untold emotional hardships (see excerpt 2 & 3, this chapter). As a participant in this online community of IF women, adding her version of what it meant to be facing infertility with a certain level of personal disclosure, forms a type of self-presentational disclosure related to ‘rapport-enhancement’ and ‘rapport-maintenance’ (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 29). It works to construct both her contribution and her identity as an IF blogger as authentic and familiar (see discussion on ‘authenticity’, Section 2.4 above). This act of voluntarily sharing stories that are most likely not told with this degree of openness with other people outside this group, invites interactants to undertake similar disclosures (Coupland et al 1988), which in turn consolidates relationships and helps strengthen the community.

Mona’s relationship with the audience is not formed through acts of alignment only however, it is strategically negotiated through positions of affiliation and difference. Interactants (readers) are acknowledged as having distinct stances and viewpoints in relation to their infertility. This positioning not only works to enhance Mona’s standpoint as an advice giver, but positions the readers as having individual choices relevant to their situations. This meaning is understood in the way Mona mitigates her advice-giving strategies, framing them within her personal experience. By interpreting her approach to infertility as proposed by the couple’s personal outlook, stating that *“everyone’s different”* (line 15), she conveys her *“therap[eutic]”* tips using an unimposing discourse that serves to mitigate the exclusion of readers who might not align with her experience, or religious position. She stresses that *“The way we’ve dealt with the situation has worked for us”* (line 16), a construction that enables her to pre-empt potential negative uptake, suggesting that her story is only one ‘example’ of how an individual or couple may come to terms with infertility. She therefore acknowledges other narratives of success and invites them to be told.

4.1.4 Level 3: Positioning a sense of self with regard to dominant *Discourses*.

The discussion here focuses on positions Mona takes towards herself and towards normative *Discourses* about infertility in the Muslim world, looking at the way she uses her narration to answer the ‘*who-am-I?*’ question (Bamberg 2010). It explains how through invoking medical, religious and social *Discourses* into the narration of painful experiences, Mona draws on perceptions of moral ideals and manages to construct a fulfilling identity for herself.

Mona’s infertility is defined in relation to a certain instrument, an “*MFI diagnosis*” (line 2) that comes from a specific medical *Discourse*. Since medical institutions rely in their practices on specific information and scientific measurements, the impositions that their medical statements (i.e. the diagnosis) project are seen as acclaimed validations of a particular status (in this case, ‘infertility’). Hence, Mona’s indexical invocation of the diagnosis in this narrative is intended to present an imposed world-to-person subject position that confirms an infertile status through evidence. A position that entitles her to expressions of pain and suffering; despite the fact that the diagnosis is of a male deficiency, not a female one. Mona uses the IF position she claims for herself as a membership card, a valid passage through which she can enter exclusive discussions on the impact of infertility on couples’ relationships and the cultural and Islamic *Discourses* that are used to influence and interpret those relationships.

Discourses of infertility and its’ struggles are both directly and indirectly invoked in Mona’s narrative through a religious frame of reference. This is evident through the way she orients towards these *Discourses* using linguistic indices that refer to “*faith*” (line 3), and submission to God’s will as implied in “*whatever must be will be*” (line 20), a statement that refers to the Islamic belief in pre-destined happenings. More vividly, she calls upon the *Discourse* of destiny or “*the divine qadaa and qadar*” (i.e. decree and destiny in Arabic - one

of the five pillars of Islam, lines 6-7) to support her reactions and actions. She uses acceptance of these *Discourses*, as in “we learnt to accept...” (line 6) as a measure of ‘correctness’ in relation to accepting their current situation. This constructs a wise and religious persona/identity for the couple who ‘choose acceptance’ as part of their faith, which in turn helps to resolve conflicting positions of pain and suffering. It becomes evident how the impact of these religious *Discourses* (in this narrative and elsewhere in the data, see excerpts 2 & 3 below) is not presented as separate from social *Discourses* of infertility and marital life. On the contrary, they are constructed as synergistic. A clear example of this is the causality relation she presents in lines 2-3 “*because of our personalities and faith, we weren’t going to let our lives be torn by it*” which supposes a direct link between her religious stance and the social outcome of the couple staying together. She constructs this as an agentive performance in “*we weren’t going to*” (line 3) through which the adoption of a religious stance becomes an active choice that the couple make to defend their marriage.

Discourses about the hardships of infertility and their negative effects not only frame the discourses of the IF community that Mona alludes to, but allow her to respond to the wider medical, religious and social narratives. The position of “*shock*” (line 1) towards the news which was “*flung at*” her (line 1), and the description of “*torn [apart] lives*” (line 3), call upon pervasive assumptions around the effect of infertility on those who face it. For instance, being “*flung*” with infertility indexes all those similar clinical instances where diagnostic information was mechanically and insensitively given out to patients. Mona’s use of ‘flung’ embeds this meaning, both pointing to the way medical institutions handle such delicate information and aligning with others who have been subjected to such institutional insensitivity. In addition, reference to “*torn lives*” embeds with in it an inherited belief about the destructive effects of infertility that has become validated through numerous and repetitive anecdotal stories. The destructive meaning this phrase holds highlights a set of

assumptions around the relation between procreation and the unity of marriage. Here, procreation is seen as a state that is ‘assumed’ as achievable via marriage. It is a sign of a marriage’s ‘success’. In the same way, infertility is perceived as a threat to married women’s social role and to their ability to maintain a successful relationship (see section 2.5.2). The construction ‘tear couples lives apart’ reproduces social perceptions of how infertility struggles could lead to grave consequences. It implies tensions that are –at least partly- linked to the social/religious expectations placed on married couples. Mona’s defensive positioning in “*we weren’t going to let our lives be torn apart by it*” acknowledges and challenges these assumptions. She manages this meaning by framing the couple’s suffering within a world-to-person direction (the medical and the social) constructing these *Discourses* as destructive, then positioning herself strongly against them.

The interrelation between religious and social ideologies about the role of a married Muslim woman appears in Mona’s reproduction of dominant Islamic views. Her ideological presuppositions emerge in her alignment with these socio-religious *Discourses*, as she alludes to the expectations set within the Muslim world about what a ‘good Muslim wife’ should do. Standing by the husband through the good and the bad is one of the fundamental expectations of a wife’s role (Inhorn 1996; Hamdan 2009). Moreover, a supportive wife who takes the weight of blame away from the husband, as she does through silencing the husband’s medical diagnosis (replaced with an infertile ‘couple’ position), situates her in a position that is preferable in cases of infertility in Muslim cultures (Inhorn 2004; Tahiri et al. 2015). Through taking on these ‘wifely’ roles, she constructs herself as ‘doing the right thing’ both culturally and religiously. Theological and ideological stances of abiding by one’s religious beliefs are also presented through the therapy model of “*helping others*” and “*striving to be the best Muslims*” (line 10) and linked to a strengthened marital relationship (as she states in “*our relationship becomes better when we work together while aiding others*” lines 16-17). Thus,

Mona's responses and actions are constructed as based on religious *Discourses* of God's service and marital bonds (Mumtaz et al 2013; Obeidat et al. 2014). Through it, a preferable identity as a wife who supports her husband at difficult times through agentic choices of solidarity and togetherness overrides the 'torn-apart' social assumptions and the powerless infertile subjectivity.

Further, in Muslim communities having children potentially bestows one with socio-cultural capital within the community (Inhorn 2004; Abu-Rabia 2013). The medical and social discourses induce certain meanings of less power and a lower social status. These two placements are challenged through powerful religious *Discourses*. For instance, a *Discourse* of acceptance is used to construct rival positions of marital unity and of leading a purposeful life. She submits to the 'un-controllable' world-to-person projections that she has no power over (i.e. her inability to conceive) through reference to the tenants of her faith (lines 6-7) and shifts focus in order to come to terms with her situation and move forward in her life "*Our focus was on the positive and the aspects of our lives that we had control of*" (lines 11 & 12). Her movement from a negative to a positive outlook is enabled by alluding to a narrative in which Muslims are defined by measures of help to others, as indexed in the category of "*best Muslims*" (line 10) and not by their ability to reproduce. Although religious *Discourses*, that suggest marriage is predominantly about reproduction, remain at the heart of Islamic communities' beliefs (Inhorn 1996; Serour 2008), Mona alternates to other religious prescriptions of purposefulness, suggesting that she still has a worthwhile life. In advocating alternative roles to childbearing, she subdues her desire to conceive shifting her perspective and goals away from it. The type of identity work that she presents avoids positions of fighting to achieve conception or seeking further medical help. Rather, the couple are constructed as '*giving in to qadar*' (destiny) and embracing alternative acts to compensate for the void of childbearing "*to be the best Muslims we can be. Mostly in remembrance of our*

creator but also in service to our community” (lines 13-14). Through this construction, she merges positions of religious teachings with universal positions of humanity and offering help to others (see lines 9-14), enabling her to subdue her mothering desires and to accentuate her socio-religious roles to facilitate and project a meaningful existence.

Overall, in terms of answering the ‘*who-am-I question*’ (Bamberg 2010), Mona achieves the following: she establishes herself emotionally as an infertile woman in a world-to-person direction through anchoring her story to the *Discourse* of IF suffering. Through this placement, she manages her social and moral positions using an aligned-couple identity, separating herself from the subject positions of infertility and struggle, and offering a positive social frame around her husband and her marriage. She uses religious *Discourses* of acceptance and social *Discourses* associated with helping others, arguing for an alternative (more fulfilling) moral stance of human help to endorse and validate her interpretation of an MIF status. This allows her to maintain her positive sense of self as a good Muslim and a contributing human. Through this, she masks those underlying emotional and resistant positions towards infertility (see Appendix I “*Being in denial*” for a post by Mona in which she takes alternative displays of positions and more resistant stances).

4.1.5 The identification of Discourses

This section is aimed at clarifying, through a worked-up example, how Discourses and master narratives are identified in this study. The following figure (1.1) presents the first of Mona’s posts. Its aim is to highlight the identification of single or multiple intersecting discourses during the analysis process. The presented discourses are in no way conclusive, but aim at offering insight into the underlying work that is not presented in the analysis as shown in this chapter, thus facilitating replication and further work.

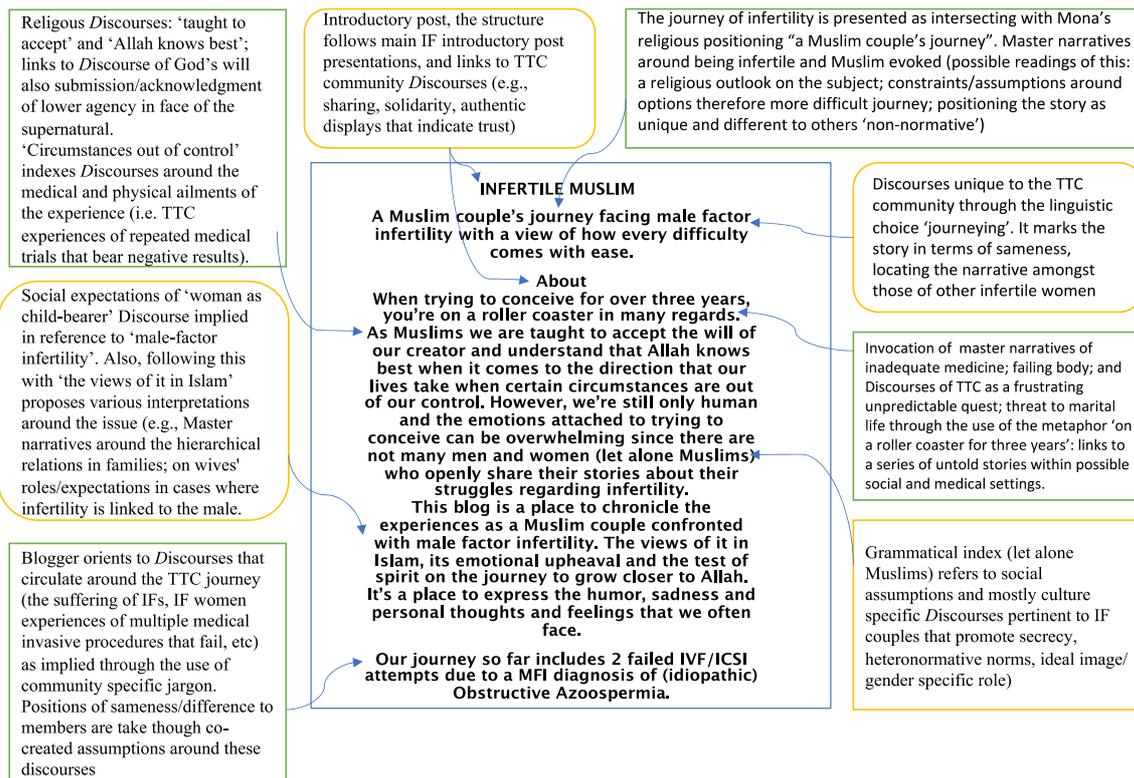


Figure 1.1 Simplified model of Discourse/Narrative identification

4.1.6 Summary

The analysis demonstrates how identity work is constructed in Mona's narrative in relation to the three levels of positioning. The self is described as moving through stages of maturity in relation to the imposed infertility position, working to reach an agentively chosen submissive state in relation to the religious *Discourse* of acceptance. Interactionally, the analysis has shown how Mona calls upon shared experiences of infertility and suffering to invite aligned stances and contribute to a wider *Discourse* of IF narratives. Several master narratives are invoked in the construction of Mona's IF identity. She constantly positions herself in relation to religious *Discourses*, whilst calling upon implicit positions in relation to cultural and medical *Discourses*. The analysis reveals that whilst infertility imposes a world-to-person fit, in relation both medical and religious *Discourses*, Mona reworks her position by

manipulating particular religious *Discourses* of purposefulness in order to present some form of control ('self-to-world' fit) when it comes to cultural positions of procreation.

4.2 On Being MIF: Different Perspectives

This section continues to look at how newly acquired MIF positions are constructed in relation to 'others' in the story world and to *Discourses* surrounding infertility. In contrast to Mona's previous narrative, where she positions herself as submissive to the prevailing religious *Discourses* of fate and destiny, and accommodating to societal norms of marital stability and wifely roles, the analysis here presents two excerpts which offer alternative views to these religious and cultural impositions. The first post by Suki (excerpt 2 below) (see Table 1.1, Chapter Three for details) explains how as a MIF, she finds a way to negotiate and critique social norms around reproduction without causing a threat to her religious identity. A more deviant position is presented in the second segment. In it, the blogger Leila takes on positions that are atypical of the self-definitions presented by the majority of MIF women in the dataset reviewed. The analysis shows how this woman rejects both religious and cultural subject positions, choosing to form her own definitions of self. Full analysis of the data using the three levels of positioning was carried out, however analyses are presented here in brief, due to word limitations.

4.2.1 Suki.

Excerpt 2: *Awkward conversations*, Suki, A Baba InshaAllah. Posted 18-Jan-2014

- 1 *Most of us TTCers [Trying to Conceivers] have had the uncomfortable questions and well-*
- 2 *meaning (but ill-informed and insensitive) advice. In communities where big families are the*
- 3 *norm and personal boundaries are often blurry and porous, it's a lot more challenging*

4 *because it's virtually expected for couples to start a family after the first year – case in point,*
5 *the Muslim community in Cape Town.*
6 *And what irritates me is the “expert”... all sorts of advice on how I should change my*
7 *diet/lifestyle/natural remedies/medication/BD [Baby Dance = Sex] position and in no time*
8 *I'll be pregnant.*
9 *In my experience, the people asking the questions are more often than not those who have no*
10 *business knowing. My close family and friends rarely ask because they know what they need*
11 *to know, and understand that I will share what I want when I want.*
12 *What kinds of challenging conversations are you faced with in your community when it*
13 *comes to TTC?*

In this narrative, Suki takes various cultural and religious stances towards her infertile identity, negotiating her position in relation to this category and to her interactional partners. She refutes social intrusion on her reproductive body and life choices, constructing herself as agentive and in control of her own life course. Unlike Mona, Suki's perspective is less aligned to a religious interpretation; rather she displays criticisms towards the prevailing Discourses and roles assigned to her by her local religious community.

Level 1 positioning: The story is set thematically to argue against a particular social situation of “*awkward*” (title) or “*challenging*” (line 12) conversations, which refer to expectations on procreation. The characters in the story are invoked to support this argument through a self vs. other positioning. Suki presents herself “*I*” (lines 6, 8, 11) as infertile and as a representative of couples who are trying to conceive “*us TTCers*” (line 1) in opposition to the “*the expert*” (line 6), a prototypical character brought in as an example of intrusive people in the local “*community*” (lines 2 & 12). Although the narrative does not define the intrusive

“*expert*” as female, the pragmatic connotations led by the topics this expert discusses and their background (i.e. being Muslim of African origin ‘Cape Town’) points towards this category, as it is unusual and socially unacceptable for male Muslims to discuss bedding positions with a female (Smerecnik et al., 2010). More evidently, in many other narratives by Suki (see Appendix II), Muslim women in Cape Town are presented as intrusive members of the community.

Suki positions herself discursively in opposition to these intrusive ‘others’ by describing their actions as “*challenging conversations*” (line 14). She uses depictions of intrusive behaviour to claim control over her life choices as an infertile woman. The description of others’ advice as “*well-meaning (but ill-informed and insensitive)*” (line 2) indicate her personal values and constructs her as more sensitive (via the rationalization of others’ actions) and more knowledgeable vis-à-vis the “ill informed” characters in her story. She rejects and denies other’s claims of knowledge and superiority as advice givers and thus renounces the subject position of ‘advice-receiver’ – a position that renders her ignorant and infers that the responsibility for infertility lies with her. To reclaim control and in opposition to other’s perspectives, she negatively evaluates and rejects any forced change of convictions “*all sorts of advice on how I should change...*” (line 6) directed towards her. She repositions herself in relation to the ‘awkward conversations’, re-evaluating her own and others’ stances towards her infertility and its particularities. In her presentation of intrusive topics, that include advice on “*diet/lifestyle/natural remedies/medication/BD [Baby Dance = Sex] position*” (line 7), Suki reclaims power over her body and her feminine/sexual persona, by advocating her position as a woman who understands her body more than those who are advising her. Using an authoritative position, she mocks their self-claimed positions of advice-givers and creates alternative categories for them instead: those who “*need to know*” and “*those who have no business knowing*” (lines 11; 10). While the *need to know* category

includes genuinely caring family and friends who rarely ask, those who *have no business knowing* are constructed as distant others, who are not family nor friends, a positioning that renders their questioning/advice illegitimate (i.e. not emerging from a proximate relationship and genuine care). These ‘others’ are condensed in the ironic naming of the ‘expert’ character, which she describes as an ill-informed, intrusive, irritating and insensitive persona that represents those who ‘ask’ in the social community (see lines 2-5; line 12). Through this classification Suki narratively frames all the issues discussed (lines 6-8) as personal private matters, marked with the personal and possessive pronouns (how “*I*” should change “*my*” - line 6) – and reinforced through illocutionary sarcasm “*and in no time I’ll be pregnant*” (lines 7-8). Her construction strategically scorns others’ perspectives, denying them the epistemic position they claim for themselves as knowledgeable advisors, whilst reinforcing stances of rejection towards socially dominant narratives about reproductive behaviour.

Level 2 positioning: Suki presents her story as a part of a shared background of common experiences. She provides context-specific events that are aimed at inducing aligned stances on stories of the social invasion of infertile women’s lives. For instance, both the opening and closing lines co-construct the subject through assumed generalisations and supposed common stances. This is underscored in the prompt for accounts of similarity (i.e. asking them what kind of similar challenges they have faced in lines 12-13). Through the latter rhetorical question, Suki positions the readers on bases of mutual experiences given their shared background. The modal of certainty ‘most’ in “*most of us TTCers have had the uncomfortable questions...*” (line 1), invokes readers’ experiential stories ‘imaginatively’ and envisages a collective display of negative stances taken by her IF readers towards related events/people similar to those in her own encounter. She constructs this collective stance using several discursive strategies, such as employing interactive invocation (lines 12-13

quoted above); using inclusive indicators “*us*” “*you*” (lines 1; 12); and reinforcing personal cognitive and emotional states e.g. “*what irritates me*”, “*In my experience...*” (lines 6; 9). These strategies enable Suki to construct a distinctive audience involvement through which she grounds her stance(s) towards others, frames her story within a larger underlying co-construction of ‘common’ stories, and constructs the self as united in experience with the readers. Indeed, her claim of membership “*us TTCers*” (line 1) is used to reflect those assumed evaluations and shared IF values that emerge from narratives of experience. It links to a shared moral standing that is based upon a hybrid of IF stances and TTC community norms.

Clearly, her report on encounters that violate the shared valued system of privacy (lines 6-11) is indicative of these values/norms. Suki presents Muslim women of Cape Town as a *type* that violates the CofP’s value system. She constructs her readers’ stances as aligned with her own towards social *Discourses*/personas that do not respect personal boundaries. Through proposing a collective stance and positioning the self as insider “*us TTCers*”, constructing the self as a person who embraces and defends the shared IF value system, Suki presents a superior moral identity that is different from behaviours of those *other* intruders in local “*communities*” (lines 2-3; 5; 12).

Level 3 Positioning: Suki construes defiant positions of self by invoking relevant socio-cultural expectations of procreation. She takes on an authoritative stance, linked directly with her personal experience, to establish a critical stance against these *Discourses*. Her opposing stance towards “*challenging conversations*” (line 14) and expectations of fertility and reproduction (set by her religious community), mark her rejection of the world-to-person subject position (Bamberg 2010). She negatively portrays how people expect couples to have children “*after the first year*” of marriage (line 4), describing their expectations as irrational

and intrusive, and marking people who take on these positions and promote such social expectations as irrational themselves. Others' claimed social roles are described as crossing the line by not respecting personal boundaries.

The negative construction of these social behaviours as “*uncomfortable*”, “*ill-informed*”, “*insensitive*” (lines 1-2), “*blurry and porous*” (line 3), perform a stance of rejection towards the master narratives behind these behaviours. These narratives include her position as infertile and allude to the emotional stress meted on Suki via the very act of others' inquiry about her fertility (as inferred through positioning them as “*insensitive*”). This along with social narratives of community socialisation norms (inquiring about personal matters), and expectations of procreation after marriage, which the antagonists use to subjectify her (as implied through their invasive nature, being “*uncomfortable*”, “*blurry and porous*”). By rejecting these narratives, Suki disaligns herself from the ‘others’ she critiques, whilst calling for more ‘rigid and defined’ boundaries between women in the social community in relation to personal behaviours/decisions/actions, particularly childbearing.

Additionally, by locating herself as a moral authority, she is not merely evaluating and criticising stances of unspecified social actors, but is predicating shared values and reformulating moral norms. These values and norms are based on morally evaluated notions about the relationship between the individual and the social order, including conventional subject positions. Hence, she is negotiating moral personhood and working towards the negotiation and reproduction of moral norms and *Discourses* which are performed and ascribed by ‘others’ and produced by and through the social world (cf. Laclau, 2005: 68). These include *Discourses* in which the individual is free to dictate their own journey towards conception and with whom they want to share this journey with.

To explain further, what Suki manages to do on the level of constructing her infertile identity is to localize and juxtapose it to the *Discourses* produced by the “Muslim community

in Cape Town” (line 5). The self (in Suki’s case) is interestingly positioned in opposition to the social expectation of conceiving within the first year of marriage. Although Suki’s blog is an infertility blog, in which she constructs herself repeatedly as a woman who desires motherhood, this position of self does not contradict her rejection of being positioned by others as a failure through dominant *Discourses* of normative reproductive and marital behaviour. What she tries to accomplish is resistance to the social positions in local conversations, where the self (and others in similar circumstances) are placed and evaluated within and by social *Discourses* of reproduction.

The construction of negative social *Discourses*, delivered and promoted by ‘women’ (who Suki specifies are from the Muslim community of Cape Town) reveals an underlying relation between their religious background and the *Discourses* they are promoting. Although religion is not emphasised in this narrative, its effect is made explicit in another post by Suki “*Is sisterhood a myth?*” (Appendix II). In it, she criticises the female local community of Cape Town, criticising them for placing hardships on other women. Notions of “*sisterhood*” and female support are brought in to index values related to being a ‘woman’ and to counter criticism directed to her on issues such as her Islamic attire (the ‘hijab’). The ideologies enacted and reproduced in this post (Appendix II) signify normative socio-religious *Discourses* that impose *world-to-person* positions on women like Suki. In her defence, she argues that her Islamic views do not necessarily need to be aligned with theirs. Instead, she defies their social impositions by offering a unique stand on her moral thought and relationship with God. Through it, she emphasises a *person-to world*, instead of a *world-to-person*, direction of fit in relation to her Muslim - and other - identities.

In summary, in her posts Suki rejects being positioned by others in critical ways that challenge her claims to an individualised self. She faces these criticisms with moral stances, whilst assessing the judgements of others as prejudicial and insensitive. She works to occupy

a presumably superior moral account in positioning herself and the women that she identifies with, aligning their positions with existing social-moral grounds of sisterhood and woman's support for each other. By analysing *others'* motives and countering their claims (Bamberg 2004), she manages to assume and attribute roles to herself and others by constructing a more skilful/aware and less critical position of self as a blogger. In doing so, she claims a 'righteous' identity, performed by rejecting others' evaluations and criticisms. She is legitimised to do so through her own experience.

4.2.2 Leila.

The following excerpt presents an example of a 'rejecting position' taken by a Muslim blogger towards cultural and religious Discourses related to infertility. The excerpt is a selected segment from Leila's post "*What not to say to infertiles*" (See Appendix III for full post).

Excerpt 3: *What Not to Say to Infertiles: "It's God's Will"*. Leila, Beyond What Ifs. Posted 23-Apr-2014

- 1 *So you can see why it's hard for me to not to punch you in the face. If a God exists, I will*
- 2 *never accept that certain people have been chosen to have children, anymore than Infertiles*
- 3 *are chosen to be deprived of them. If you insist that this is God, then I reject your God,*
- 4 *instead, turning to mine—a source I opt to rely on in order to weather hardships which all of*
- 5 *us must confront in one way or another.*
- 6 *So instead of mindlessly repeating words to demonstrate your faith and wisdom, I'm pretty*
- 7 *sure our greater responsibility is to examine spoken words carefully. If the true intent is to*
- 8 *invoke God—fate or any higher purpose/being—with the purpose of providing others*

- 9 *comfort, then perhaps the focus should be on providing greater capacity to you for*
 10 *compassion.*

Level 1 positioning: In this narrative Leila's character (the protagonist) is created in relation to social actors in her local community (antagonists) and to God. She invokes these characters in order to take on stances in relation to socio-religious *Discourses* about infertility and God's will. She presents the social actors by constructing a 'typical' *other*, similar to Suki's 'expert' character in "*Awkward conversations*" (4.2.1 above). This 'other' is described as "*mostly women*" (line 16, Appendix III) from the Pakistani Muslim social community in the United States²⁶ that she associates with. Particularities of the encounters with these women are not provided, however, they are positioned in relation to their background "*who grew up here in the US and those who are in Pakistan*" line (13-14 appendix III) and critiqued on the basis of their rhetoric, i.e. using a repertoire of religious phrases (lines 8-12, appendix III). The phrases used by these women –which she provides in Urdu with English translations - are composed of Islamic tenets, used as social tools that are meant to comfort and advise her on her situation. They demonstrate a particular stance of belief and inform the subject positions imposed on Leila, where she is expected to accept the concept of her infertility being an act of *Qadar* (i.e. fate, or a declaration of the Divine). In using the evaluative stance "*awful*" in describing *other women's* stances/phrases "*awful words repeated mindlessly*" (line 14, appendix III), Leila rejects this subject position and evaluates *other women* as making recurring thoughtless and inconsiderate verbal abuses that are hurtful to people who are suffering from failure to conceive.

²⁶ The data did not show significant differences in relation to where women lived. Although the data was insufficient to draw generalisable conclusions, the examples in the data showing women living in the USA, UK, Indonesia, Kuwait etc. suggests that MIF women are influenced by similar cultural and religious *Discourses* regardless of their physical location. The way they construct their refusal/negotiation/acceptance of certain discourses does not correspond with being in Eastern vs. Western cultures, but is rather related to the individuals' experiences, world-views and positionality towards interpretive frameworks available to them.

Further, through storying her infertility journey and talking about the “*repeated loss of a child*”, Leila identifies as a victim, both in regard to her infertility experience, and in relation to the words of others (line 16). Similarly, other women’s claims of faith; wisdom; or providing comfort for others (lines 39-43) are de-legitimised. The genuineness of their actions is contested using the hypothetical conditional ‘*if*’: “*If the true intent*”, (line 38) which proposes internal motives that imply selfishness and egotism on the part of the other women. The notion of compassion between women, which Suki calls upon in her story (Appendix III), is suggested here again, and is used to mark these women as failing to maintain feminine values of support.

In an attempt to demarcate herself as different from these thoughtless others, Leila positions the characters in an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ construction. She builds this division on the basis of membership attributes of inclusion/exclusion and marks it through social and moral differences (lines 12-15). For instance, she indexes her belonging to this community by claiming a knowledgeable stance of how they behave “*In most South Asian...*” (line), then she uses this location as an insider to manage a divergent position. Another example is how she employs positive evaluations in constructing her character, whilst working to discursively position *others* negatively. This is particularly observed in the evaluative stance “*awful words repeated mindlessly*” (line 11) that she uses to refer to *Discourses* that are culturally accepted (or at least acknowledged since they are shared and repeated) which gain their qualification from religious contexts.

In constructing the character of God, she employs rhetorical strategies such as ironic positioning (Weizman 2013) and sarcasm. She uses these to refer to religious ideological positions that are common in Muslim rhetoric, such the belief that “*it is for the best*” (line 24) for some people to not have children and that it “*serves a greater purpose*” (line 23) for a Muslim woman to experience pain and suffering (cf. Mona’s invocation of these positions

above). She constructs these through an ironic display to position *other women* as irrational and cruel, which is projected on her characterisation of God from their point of view “*our benevolent God who chooses to give and take a child*” (lines 24-25); “*If you miscarry and are struggling to have children, it is for the best*” (lines 23-33). Her use of a sarcastic display in the latter constructions places her perspective in sharp contrast to the antagonists, thus consolidating her argument and invoking a stance of defiance.

Leila proposes a different position to that proffered by the women in her narrative. She rejects their “*mindless*” repetition of the conventional religious rhetoric of compassion. Although her constructions index atheism (e.g. “*due to the whims of our God*” line 30; “*if a God exists*” line 34), she repositions herself later on through performing an ‘eclectic believer’ identity, characterised by descriptions of a different God who does not choose to make infertile women suffer (lines 33-34). She constructs an alternative identity for God than that of the other protagonists in her story, describing ‘her God’ as a sensitive God, not a merciless God who selectively chooses to make his devotees suffer, as other women claim.

Level 2 positioning: In the segment presented above, Leila addresses other women in the community using the plural (you) as if they are part of the audience. This synthetic personalisation (Fairclough 1989; 2001) serves to position them as part of the illocutionary act of the speaker. She uses this conversational role-play style to recreate ‘supposed’ positions and stances for the ‘other women’ in order to highlight the opposing stances she wants within a shared contextual IF background. Through direct address, she constructs these women as recipients of her messages, whilst the ‘actual’ intended audience (the IF readers) are geared towards taking aligned stances to the called upon narratives of painful experiences. The positioning of self in the IF group invites alignment to the moral stances she

sees as just and considerate, and distances both herself and the infertility narratives of suffering from being positioned by *others*' imposed *Discourses*.

Just like Mona and Suki, Leila works to narratively create alliances based on shared moral ideals. By creating a 'world-of-women' setting in which the story is placed, then performing her infertile self through various positions, Leila makes her narrative appeal to her readers' meta-ethical models by calling upon collective experiences of IF-driven social intimidation. Her positions of self as an expert and knowledgeable insider allow her to take on the role of an IF representative, setting rules of moral order and offering shared evaluative stances towards the *Discourses* she is contesting. Advice pieces on a considered compassionate rhetoric (lines 36-37) given to 'other women' - who are positioned as lacking knowledge of these moral values - are means of constructing a co-ethical IF model. She uses this advice-giving position to discursively construct a more rational alternative repertoire and call for aligned stances based on a shared background of experience(s). Her attempts to reclaim agency over what she allows or disallows in conversations with others, the ridicule and ironic use of religious *Discourses* (see level 1 above), all serve to reflect claims to an experience-infused IF morality, aligning herself with shared evaluations of a Western/ised behaviour ("*here in the US*" line 14) and attitudes towards infertility-related social interactions.

Level 3 positioning: Religious based *Discourses* and ideologies about how infertile woman 'should' face hardships are directly evoked and challenged in this text. Leila draws on perceptions of these *Discourses* and how they become produced by gatekeepers in society. The self is presented as being subjected to these competing and contradictory *Discourses* which imply that accepting pain and suffering is a good thing as it is given by God. She argues against these contradictions explaining how they deflate the individual and trivialise

the painful experience of infertility (lines 30-33, index III). In defiance, she takes on a position of rejection. She rejects *Discourses* of decree and fails to align with perceiving infertility as serving ‘a greater purpose’. She asserts such evaluations are “*awful*” and mindless. This rejection puts her ontological stance of believing (as a Muslim) under scrutiny. Her rejection of socio-religious impositions is made even more apparent in the description of her suffering. By employing compelling vivid imageries of pain and suffering, she highlights the deep contrast between the idealistic religious position of acceptance of God’s will, as advocated by society (*other women*) and IF women’s personal experiences (refer to lines 30-33, Appendix III).

Her statement “*If a God exists*” (line 34) forms the climax of this rejection of religious narratives. Her defiance of socio-religious doctrine invokes a self that is alienated from pervasive *Discourses* imposed by society. Alternatively, she creates a religious stance for herself based on a reformed positioning of God as sympathetic and kind “*I reject your God, instead, turning to mine*” (line 37). The self is repositioned to a more rational position of a self-defined believer, whose expectations of who God is (merciful and kind) are in contrast to rhetoric brought by others which depict God as driven by his “*whims*” (line 27). The religious identity that she creates for herself is constructed as liberated from the common religious *Discourses* of decree and destiny and is agentive in defining her own spirituality “*a source I opt to rely on*” (line 37).

4.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from the analysis of posts constructed by three Muslim women going through the initial stages of their infertility experience. The aim was to answer the research questions on what identities/positions infertile Muslim women construct

for themselves in the process of storytelling and what tools they use to achieve those constructions and positions. The analysis revealed that IF women utilise various linguistic and discursive strategies (story telling techniques) to present their narratives of experience with the aim of making these narratives appeal to the readers' meta-ethical models and experiences. Through them, they call upon shared experiences of IF suffering and constantly work towards aligning themselves with their readers, presenting themselves as knowledgeable insiders of the TTC community. Other characters, particularly the category of 'other women' are invoked to allow for comparative stance taking acts and position/role evaluations in relation to everyday events.

The analysis also revealed that medical, religious and cultural *Discourses* are key to understanding how MIF women construct and manage their IF identity. Religious *Discourses* in particular play a vital role in the initial construction of self as infertile, allowing women to navigate their sense of self through positions they take towards relevant religious models. Although the women in the analyses vary in the way they conform with or contest these *Discourses*, they all utilise them to display favoured positions of self; as well as to navigate their recent social locations and evaluate/critique relevant socio-cultural norms. A pertinent observation is that IF women often reposition their identities using self-defined religious *Discourses* in order to navigate towards or maintain positive representations of the self, whilst handling their painful experiences.

Chapter Five: Results

The Journey: God, Body & People

5.0 Introduction

Chapter Four investigated how MIF women manage their identities at the early stages of diagnosis. Following on from this, this chapter explores how identities and representations of self are managed in the narration of recent medical and social events during the middle-stage of the ‘trying to conceive’ journey. Drawing upon the narrative constructions of the referential world and the characters involved, and underscoring the interactive engagement between the teller and audience, the analysis works towards revealing the underlying representations of self in relation to master religious, social and medical *Discourses*.

As in Chapter Four, this chapter starts with an exploration of Mona’s stories followed by a comparative presentation of excerpts from two other bloggers, with the aim of presenting identity constructions similar to/different from Mona’s case.

5.1 Difficult Days: Mona’s Story

In this section, the analysis of Mona’s narrative reveals how religious and social *Discourses*, that infertile women are subjected to, are deeply ingrained in their constructions of MIF identity. Mona continues to take on similar stances to those she exhibited at the early stages of diagnosis (see Chapter Four). Nevertheless, these stances are not straightforward or passive, but are *negotiated* and result from an on-going movement towards and away from the position that she takes in relation to God, other people (including her husband) and her body. The way this is accomplished and other socio-cultural positions with regards to navigating the infertility journey are explained below.

Excerpt 6: *To Face Denial*, Mona, Infertile Muslim, Sep 18 2011

1 *DW's [Dear Wife's] confessions:*
2 *I'm going to be honest now... This BFN [Big Fat Negative] made me realize how*
3 *much denial I'm in regarding our infertility.*
4 *When I went off the pill, the "know it all" folks said it takes some time for your body*
5 *to regulate... I didn't believe that.*
6 *Even after the first year, when my OB/GYN [Obstetrics and Gynaecology] said we*
7 *should try for another 6 months, I had an inkling that something was wrong... but*
8 *insisted to believe that everything happens in due time.*
9 *It seemed like everyone was falling pregnant around me... but I refused to obsess. I*
10 *didn't want to chart my BBT [Basal Body Temperature] or use ovulation predictors.*
11 *We went for the basic fertility screening and though my husband's semen analysis*
12 *showed azoospermia... there was nothing wrong with me so it's not that bad.*
13 *After seeing our fertility specialist and starting our first IVF [In-Vitro Fertilisation]*
14 *process... my logic was that if there were embryos, they would just stick.*
15 *Then the BFN [Big Fat Negative] came!*
16 *This is when I realized that dealing with infertility is something bigger than I ever*
17 *thought it was. What a test in humility!*
18 *I'm having many difficult days dealing with the devastation after our failed IVF...*
19 *then I also have to be strong enough to console my husband when he constantly*
20 *apologizes because he believes it's his fault.*
21 *I know that Allah doesn't test us with more than we can handle, but right now I feel*
22 *defeated and just wish that this painful emptiness would simply disappear.*

5.1.1 Level 1: Positioning of characters in the story world & their relationality.

Mona's post offers a self-revealing reflective narrative, sharing the struggles she has been facing whilst trying to conceive. Through her telling, Mona negotiates blame and responsibility as she narrates how she came to accept the diagnosis of infertility. This is managed through setting up a reasoned argument based on a recent failed IVF [In-Vitro Fertilisation] attempt, in which her character is placed at the centre of the telling. Other personas: her husband, other women in society, medical actors and God, are woven into the narration, presenting a dilemmatic infertile identity, as shown below.

Mona constructs her character as a supportive wife and a reflective individual. She achieves these positions through both linguistic realisation and through the sequencing of events. The wife identity takes precedence, as she prefaces her telling with ("*DW*²⁷'s [dear wife] *confessions*:" line 1) a diminutive form that indexes a separate and perhaps a subordinate role to the husband in the family order. The wife persona then claims the floor, offering 'confessions' of information that were previously untold. These confessions, marked with the possessive 's' and followed by a semi colon, emphasise *her* perspective of the telling. She sets-up this revelation further by asserting an intention of honesty - "*I'm going to be honest now*" (line 2) - marked by the time adverbial 'now', presenting a subtle implication that earlier revelations were perhaps, repressed, or did not fully convey her side of the story. This persona suggests an intentional movement towards a more a reflective identity that is setting out to break particular restrictions, (both social and personal), and she bravely offers her 'confessions'. She is trying to construct a moral persona for herself to legitimise her status and emphasise the difficulties experienced. In so doing she

²⁷ Acronym used widely in TTC blogs.

works to align with her audience by suggesting she has confidence in their capacity to receive very sensitive information (see Level 2 below).

The positioning of the husband's character in the story supports Mona's boundary-breaking persona. Unlike the previous post (Chapter Four, Excerpt I), where the 'couple' identity dominated, in this narration she positions her husband in a secondary role in the telling. The dear wife 'DW' framing of confessions (explained above) is personalised and self-reflective, as marked by the repetitive use of first person pronouns "I" usage, as in "*I went*", "*I didn't believe*", "*I refused*" etc. (lines 4; 5; 9). These constructions present her as having a more decisive role in their IF journey. The husband's character, on the other hand, is introduced as part of a medical test result (line 11) which clearly identifies him as the cause of the couple's infertility "*my husband's semen analysis showed azoospermia [zero sperm count]*" (line 12). This medical outcome positions him as responsible/blameable for the condition that rendered the couple infertile, whilst "*... there was nothing wrong with me*" (lines 11-12). The implication of these revelations is that Mona is positioned in a helpless/-victimised state with regard to her/their infertility however she is also in a more powerful position the couple's relationship since she is not the cause of their angst. This complex positioning is realised in the scene she sets of the couple. In it, the husband appears apologetically owning up to the responsibility for the situation they are in "*he constantly apologizes because he believes it's his fault*" (line 24). Whilst her role revolves around helping him cope with *his* condition "*be[ing] strong enough to console [him]*" (line 19). This construction depicts her character as heroic through self-sacrifice. For despite her suffering she 'has to be strong enough' and take on the role of carer. Mona's character manoeuvres between positions of strength and vulnerability to manage a preferred display of the self.

Blame and responsibility are similarly negotiated in the way other social and medical characters are employed in Mona's narrative. These characters: women in the community in general and pregnant women²⁸ specifically, in addition to medical professionals; are depicted as influential players who intervened – directly and indirectly- in Mona's judgment of her situation, causing her to *deny* (line 3) her infertility. They are sequenced in the telling by events they took part in at particular points in her journey (e.g. "*When I went off the pill*" (line 4), "*after the first year*" (line 6), "*the basic fertility screening*" (line 11), "*after seeing our fertility specialist*" (line 13)). Nevertheless, the roles assigned to these actors are essentially different as discussed below.

Blame is assigned to women in the community, for providing poor advice. Their effect is linked to the earliest stage of delay in pregnancy "*When [she] went off the pill*" (line 4). At this critical stage, advice offered by "*the know it all folks*" (line 4), did not help her realize the gravity of her infertility. She rejects their narratives and ridicules their perspective, describing how they naively "*... said it takes some time for your body to regulate...*" (line 4). Although their statement was immediately dismissed by them "*I didn't believe that.*" (line 5), the mere act of restating their advice in her story shows how their views had an influential effect on the way she perceived and reacted to her problem. In this regard she calls on Discourses of fertility and contraception espoused by 'folks' at large, which profess that infertility is the 'norm' for some time after stopping contraception. Although their advice is seemingly part of social/comforting talk, to ease her suffering, (by which they suggest that time

²⁸ Note that Mona does not specify the gender of these social contributors. However, this analysis assumes they are women, based on accounts from the larger corpus of data collected suggest and on data gathered in previous studies (see Chapter 2:59), since social conversations on pregnancy issues in Muslim communities are mainly discussed within female circles.

should solve the problem - “...*it takes some time...*” line 4), her bracketed labelling and sarcastic evaluation of their epistemic claim of knowledge in “*the know it all folks*” (line 8) constructs them negatively as offering misleading and uninformed information. This depicts them as blameable and somehow responsible for her neglect of the early signs of infertility

Similarly, pregnant women in Mona’s surroundings, presented in an over-generalised statement “*it seemed like everyone was falling pregnant around me*” (line 9), are constructed as having an indirect effect on her by making her highly sensitive to her delay in getting pregnant. The indefinite pronoun ‘everyone’ exaggerates the ratio of successful pregnancies, and the stress/shame and self-blame that usually comes with hearing such news. She describes this heightened sensitivity and reaction as an ‘*obsession*’ (line 9) that she is unable to overcome. As other women, these women’s unintentional, but nevertheless detrimental advice, and their ability to effortlessly become pregnant is suggested to have contributed to Mona’s ‘denial’ and lack of action to seek medical or other assistance early on in her fertility journey.

Arguably, in relation to her own character construction, ‘other women’ (both ‘folks’ and pregnant women) are positioned as both stabilizing and destabilizing figures: the former espousing an accepted ‘truth’ which turns into an ‘untruth’; and the latter invoked as an aspirational state – a longing for something unfairly denied to her. The invocation of these social actors is reflective of Mona’s social standing and self-evaluation, where ‘otherness’ marks infertile women’s feeling of being different from the ‘dominant culture’ of fertility because of their biological deficiency (Sandelowski & Pollock 1986). Moreover, the construction of these characters functions as a display of personal qualities that are implicitly stated. By undermining the position of the ‘folks’, Mona manages to bolster her own – i.e. to suggest that she

knew better and that her ‘inkling’ was correct. Similarly, in calling upon pregnant women around her, she manages to convey the painful state of her own longing for motherhood, in addition to constructing herself also as a rational being.

In contrast to the way other women are constructed as contributing to Mona’s in-denial stance towards infertility, medical professionals are invoked in the story to support an enlightened position of her condition. She alludes to two particular medical actors, The OB/GYN consultant and the Fertility Specialist. Their presentation through their professional job titles constructs them as authoritative and knowledgeable. The advice of the “*OB/GYN*”, that the couple “*should try for another 6 months*” (line 10) is formed as an obligatory recommendation, indicated by the modal verb “*should*”, which works to position the OB/GYN as having the power to determine the sequence of treatment based on his professional standing. Here, Mona’s positive construction of the medical advice is in stark contrast to her stance towards the advice offered by women in the community - ‘*the know it all folks*’. The medical personas and the *Discourses* associated with them are presented as constituting a vital part of her understanding of where she stands in her infertility journey “*This is when I realized that dealing with infertility is something bigger than I ever thought it was*” (lines 16-17). The significance of the temporality of the event is marked by the opening clausal adverbial ‘*This is when*’, in which the time phrase situates when her ((in)-fertile) identity altered after the uncovering “*the BFN*” (line 15) and in the aftermath of the IVF test. It is at that particular moment that she re-evaluates her position as a fertile woman and shifts her position from being in denial to confronting a situation that she now has to “*deal with*” (line 16).

Lastly, the character of God or *Allah* is invoked to construct and manage Mona’s emotional struggles. The recurring theme (see Section 4.1.3 above) of life trials is

presented through an agentive action from God “Allah”: “*I know that Allah doesn’t test us with more than we can handle*” (line 21). Portraying “Allah” as having agency over her life course allows Mona to embrace this agency (*I know*), thus framing her victimised state by reference to a more positive force; as a test that is driven by a merciful power. At the same time, the positioning of God as merciful and wise (which is emphasized by the use of negation in the fact that He “*doesn’t test us*”), allows her to manage her helpless and “*defeated*” (line 22) self. However the use of adversative ‘but’ in “*I know that Allah doesn’t [...], but right now I feel defeated*” (lines 21-22) contributes to an expression of internal conflict and hurt – even if temporary (‘right now’). ,

The portrayal of God’s character enables her to manage her victimized infertile position and to describe her approach to achieving this level of agency; that is by managing feelings of ‘defeat’ and tolerating the current pains by reliance on her faith and on God’s wisdom.

5.1.2 Level 2: Positioning of the narrator with respect to the audience.

Mona uses various stylistic devices to index discourses of belonging and similarity with her audience. Through these, she performs sociality and aligns herself more closely to her readers. Interactional alignment with the TTC community is achieved by (a) constructing an insider perspective to the Community of Practice (CofP), (b) embedding linguistic, punctuation and stylistic choices that index ‘friendship talk’, and (c) setting expectations of an interactional association based on mutual experience. These rhetorical performances project social connections that enable Mona to gain legitimacy online.

Firstly, Mona constructs an insider perspective to the CofP by appropriating the *Discourse* of the community. She uses language structure, concepts, words and stories (Wegner 1998; Holmes 1998) that exhibit her knowledge of how the community operates. She replicates the groups' style and accommodates to its' *Discourse* through the incorporation of IF-related acronyms and medical jargon such as "*BFN*", "*OB/GYN*", "*azoospermia*", as well as the structuring of events in her telling. Indeed, the narrative presentation of her life events, which is anchored to 'familiar' IF *Discourses*, (as in "*when I went of the pill*", line 4), utilises a style of self-revelation that is well established and widely used by IF women in their blogging and social networking sites (see Diamond 2010). This enables her to embed herself within the community and to claim a position of mutual engagement/interest that aligns with the group's values. Effectively, constructing a story that conforms with the group's position increases its' tellability and moves her towards becoming a core member (see Homes & Meyerhoff 1999).

Secondly, Mona's conversational style and punctuation index 'friendship talk' which enable her to perform the role of a friend to her online readers. She achieves this by constructing a 'collaborative floor', an interactive performance key to 'friendship talk' (Coates 1997). By claiming the floor in the narrative opener "*DW's confessions:*" (line 1), she signals taking a turn in the interactional space. The punctuation marker (colon) is employed to signal her entitlement to telling her story and to call for attention from her readers. Elements of interactivity are implied in the way Mona positions the readers as familiar to the topic, indicating that her telling is contiguous with previous posts by online friends. Furthermore, the informal layout that she employs, as she breaks down her telling into short sentences (rather than paragraphs), and the affective vulnerable style that she uses, (e.g. "*right now I feel*

defeated and just wish this painful emptiness would disappear” lines 21-22), index a display of personal closeness by revealing her inner secrets. Interactive displays are also achieved through her use of structures that are more related to an oral conversational style reminiscent of intimate informal gatherings. These include: signalling openness and frankness in the meta-comment “*I’m going to be honest now...*” (line 2); offering anecdotes that are told as part of reciprocal self-disclosure (e.g. “*It seemed that everyone was falling pregnant around me*” line 9); sarcastic descriptions (e.g. “*the know it all folks*” line 4); informal phrasal and lexical choices (e.g. “*folks*”, “*so it’s not that bad*” lines 4; 12); and the repeated use of the three dot filler (ellipses) “*...*” (lines 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 13, 18) - punctuation makers which serve to act like actual pauses in conversation. These structures work to decrease the social distance between the teller and audience through an affective association, an important interactional achievement in social media (see Hall 2019; Page 2012; Tuma 2012).

Finally, Mona establishes an interactional association between herself and her audience via the invocation of mutual experiences. Interactional association referred to here is based on building rapport, achieved through setting an interactional goal of positioning herself as a suffering infertile woman (Spencer-Oatey 2000; 2008). As Mona’s story builds, she employs argumentative talk embedded with rapport strategies that construct a harmonious understanding of the group. Through these arguments, she promotes positions of like-mindedness, similarity and familiarity. Like-mindedness and similarity are indexed through the perceived assumption that the target audience share similar biological and emotional histories (see Section 4.2.2 above), an assumption that underlies her biological and emotional revelations. Familiarity with social Discourses on pregnancy imposed on an IF person is alluded

to through several meanings, including their assumed recognition of “*know it all folks*”, as implied by the quotation mark usage. Rapport is further enhanced through self-disclosure. Mona’s disclosure (telling of personal story) marks an affective association with IF women (as explained above) and echoes the TTC community’s narratives of experience. Her detailed and ‘authentic’ contribution is an uplifting support strategy (i.e. you are not alone in this). It enables her to join the group in presenting her side of the story, revealing infertility as a shared experience, and indexing the fundamental values of the audience. These strategies allow her to achieve a legitimate position within the infertile online community, in line with what she proposes as pre-existing attitudes and moral perspectives of a ‘familiar’ active and engaging audience.

5.1.3 Level 3: Positioning a sense of self with regard to dominant discourses.

This section analyses how socio-cultural and medical *Discourses* about reproduction are invoked in Mona’s post, and the impact these *Discourses* have on her self-realisation and her construction of an infertile identity. It discusses how she establishes her identity as a wife by calling upon master narratives and cultural assumptions about fertility and the reproductive role of Muslim women; and how she invokes religious *Discourses* and *Discourses* of ‘the body’ to negotiate her IF position.

Mona’s construction of her character as a Muslim wife on a quest to conceive depicts how she is trying to perform a hegemonic ‘feminised’ identity that is in line with the tenants of her faith. It reflects traditional heterosexual ideologies on the roles of women and alludes to *Discourses* about the gendered duties of Muslim wives, these being: the ability to procreate, and to be supportive of their husbands

during difficult circumstances.

Mona's ideological assumption about pregnancy - an essential by-product and goal of a marriage - emerges in her statement: "*It seemed like everyone was falling pregnant around me*" (line 9). It comes from a specific *Discourse* that assumes childbearing to be 'the norm'. Narratives by women in the community that she reports on illuminate how reproductive behaviour is encountered, expected and demanded by society. Her construction of their advice and questioning (line 4-5; see section 5.1.1 above) shows how social members act as gatekeepers who reproduce and uphold social expectations of procreation after marriage.

The views/assumptions held by these influential characters contribute to MIF women's negative evaluations of themselves and to negative stances they take towards infertility. The expectations and pressures felt within Mona's social milieu had a profound impact on her, leading her to adopt and promote the 'preferred' role of a reproductive woman/wife. Many of Mona's constructions demonstrate how she had internalized culturally-assumed and favoured feminine roles and *Discourses* around successful marriage and womanhood, which assert the importance of fertility in defining a woman's status and marital success. For example, the denial of infertility that she expresses in various constructions (e.g. "*I didn't believe*", "*I insisted to believe*", "*I refused to obsess*", and "*there was nothing wrong with me*" lines 5; 7; 9 & 12) index the work she undertook to suppress her feelings of inadequacy²⁹. The negative positions that she takes in these constructions are linked to a deep engagement and understanding of the stigma and low status associated with women who are not able to provide offspring (see Chapter 2:91).

²⁹ Feelings of inadequacy amongst infertile women have been reported by many psychologists, health care researchers and social scientists (e.g. see Gipson & Meyers 2000; Poddar et al. 2014; Wallach & Mahlstedt 1985; Woods et al. 1999).

As for the second assumption about Muslim women's obligation to be supportive to their husband's throughout marital trials: this belief is uniquely applied in Mona's case. Her orientation to this view is seen as an attempt to fend off negativity related to failing to fulfil her reproductive role. As discussed in the Level 1 analysis above, Mona argues from the position of a good, supportive and caring wife, describing how she had to " ...*be strong enough to console [her] husband when he constantly apologises because he believes it's his fault*" (lines 19-20). This supportive position is constructed as an expectation of her role as wife, using verbs that imply necessity and obligation: '*then I also **have to be***'. However, taking on this obligation is rhetorically alluded to as a 'choice' that she proactively embraces. By showing that she has a choice and is agentively taking up the role of support (despite her husband's medical diagnosis), allows her to ward-off stigmatised positions of infertility (it is not always the woman's fault – more on this below) and project the recurring theme of a self-sacrificing and 'moral' persona. This preferred identity contrasts with a less empowered persona of the victim. It also works to fend off threats to her religious identity, since she accepts Allah's will for the couple.

It is worth noting here that *Discourses of sacrifice and respect in Muslim marital relationships* (as alluded to by Mona) are further overlaid by the expectation that wives will respect the will of their husbands. The caring and apologetic position she presents of her husband in lines 19-20 only reveals one side of the story. In other excerpts Mona (Appendix IV), discloses that her husband is shown as demanding secrecy with respect to their infertility, despite the fact that she wishes to discuss it more openly. She notes: "*I respect him wanting to keep our infertility a secret, but it seems this secrecy leaves me feeling isolated... from the world and sometimes even him.*" (Appendix IV, lines 9-10). Such secrecy is reflective of Eastern cultural master

narratives that perpetuate the myth that the agents of infertility are women, and therefore that infertility is a female deficiency. As such male subjects socially rarely bear a stigma of infertility³⁰. Mona constructs her silence on the issue as an obligation, a duty, in order to save his face (see lines 6-8 appendix IV: “... *because I’m meant to comfort my husband and ease his pain of bearing the burden of carrying the cause of our infertility.*”). This demand of ‘secrecy’ (on his behalf) and her acceptance of it, on the basis of ‘respect’ shows how cultural perceptions of *Discourses of the body* constrain the voices of infertile couples and contributes to the stigmatization of those labelled as infertile. In dealing with this disadvantaged position and social obligation to “*comfort [her] husband and ease his pain*”, Mona is only left with implicit contestations expressed through verbal positions of pain and suffering. She notes how she felt “*plagued with...*”; “*anger, frustration, hopelessness, fear*” of not being able to bear a child (Appendix IV, line 5).

To negotiate contradictory positions around her identity as a supportive religious wife on the one hand, and a vulnerable woman struggling with denied motherhood on the other hand, Mona alludes to two *Discourses*: the ‘failing body’ (lines 9-12) and God’s ‘test’ (lines 25-26). In constructing her infertility problem first as resulting from a failing body, she manages to convey experiences of pain and suffering, and to invoke emotional and religious perspectives in her account. The way she achieves this is explained below.

Mona presents infertility in relation to common beliefs about sexual reproductive health which view women’s bodies as having a natural capacity to conceive. She alludes to these *Discourses* in her construction of ‘ovulation’ and

³⁰ As documented by Riessman (2002) in her analysis of infertile Asian women’s narratives, and by Inhorn (2003) on her work on male infertility in Egypt. See also Throsby and Gill (2004).

'embryos' as failing to function in the way they are meant to ("*I refused to use BBT charts or ovulation predictors*", "*there was nothing wrong with me*", "*if there were embryos, they would just stick*" lines 9; 10; 12). Her narrative is part of dominant understanding of femininity as being embedded in the specific biological body. Defectiveness and failure of the body (Gillespie 2000; Ulrich & Weatherall 2000) is implied through contradictory self-positions. Her rejection of having a physical problem ("*there was nothing wrong with me*" line 9), is altered towards an opposite position of accepting infertility following the IVF result. The complexity involved in the earlier denial is the implication embedded within it that suggests there *was* something wrong with her 'physically' after all. The movement towards accepting infertility through the 'in-denial' thesis that she presents, renders her as physically incompetent, thus less of a woman (Solbrække & Bondevik 2015). These constructions link her biological failure to her failure as a wife and woman who is unable to procreate. Assumptions about the 'defectiveness of the body', which is assumed to be a female concern, are presented through a medical evaluation of her reproductive capacity: "*refused to chart my BBT or use ovulation predictors*" (line 10). Despite the main fact being that it was her husband's body which was at fault "*the basic fertility screening [...]my husband's semen analysis showed azoospermia*" (line 13), she focuses on the "*BFN*" (line 15) to mark her body as defective. Via this account, she alludes to prevailing assumptions about women carrying the infertility burden, which aligns with social evaluations of her reproductive capacity (as expressed by "*the know it all folks*").

Mona's appraisal of the medical diagnoses as viable interpretations of her (& her husband's) condition is indicative of the power medical and institutional discourse have over women's self-realization. Even in the face of the shocking BFN

test result, she expresses disappointment with her lack of understanding about how medicine works (in “*my logic was that if there were embryos, they would just stick*” lines 13-14). Arguably, self-blame is evident here despite the fact that it was her husband’s impotency “*azoospermia*” (line 12) that is the major factor in the couple’s infertility (see Brown 2013 on how women often frame narratives of trauma through discourses of self-blame). Instead however, Mona constructs an infertile identity for herself, constructing her body as defective with the aid of a strong medical evidence “*Then the BFN came!*” (line 15) “*What a test in humility!*” (line 17). It is the mocking of her own arrogance in accepting that her body is at fault (previous quote) which allows her to perform an infertile female identity.

To manage this imposed world-to-person position as a woman with a ‘failing’ body, Mona utilises the religious interpretive frame (see level 1 above) to interpret her whole infertile position - the ‘failing body’ and consequential failures in her role as a reproductive wife, a female, and mother. Through framing these as hardships or ‘tests’ from God (line 21-25), she reassigns her roles/subject positions to work in her favour, establishing her as a true Muslim believer. This comes from a Muslim religious *Discourse* that values the acceptance of life’s challenges as a godly given ‘tests’ or even ‘gifts’, opportunities to grow closer to God and gain spiritual value. These tests are also viewed as temporary, well-reasoned and to one’s own advantage, such that one will be rewarded. She embraces this religious ideology through an epistemic stance (“*I know*” line 21), and uses the feelings of ‘defeat’ (line 22) to showcase pain - not objection. In this placement of self, as ‘surrendering to God’s will’, one of the fundamental beliefs of Islam (See Section 2.5.2), Mona’s ‘helpless’ subject position becomes empowered, validated by her religious positioning (as similarly discussed in Chapter 4 above). It also places other world-to-person

influences, such as medical affirmations and social pressures, as secondary to a greater power who understands her suffering and knows her limits (as in “*I know that Allah doesn’t test us with more than we can handle*” line 21). This construction calls upon the religious Islamic Discourse of a divine God who promises to ease difficult times, enabling her to promote hope and to positively manage her infertile subject position through acceptance and religious understanding.

Summary

In this excerpt, Mona invokes Discourses in relation to her role as a woman, her body, medicine and religion to counter medical and social world-to-person subject positions of infertility. These Discourses enable her to position herself both as a victim and as a reflective and balanced individual in relation to the emotionally daunting and stigmatised position of infertility. Her constructions however reveal a dilemmatic tension between her social roles, biological needs and religious outlook: trying to be who she is and who she wants to be (i.e. a good wife; a fertile, accepting Muslim), while being placed in social and medical subject positions that denote her as infertile.

5.2 Difficult Days: Nora and Salam’s Stories

This section continues to investigate how identity work is achieved in Muslim women’s narratives of experience in their quest to conceive. Blogposts by Nora and Salam are presented to explain how these women take on positions in relation to themselves (their bodies) and others, and in relation to the socio-religious contexts that they orient to in their posts. This serves to complement the analysis above and draw out additional themes/issues on the social perceptions of infertility, gender roles and how MIFs negotiate a position based on the inter-relation between religion and

infertility. The section follows the three levels of positioning, examining both women's narratives briefly.

5.2.1 Nora.

This analysis details the positions that Nora takes in relation to medical Discourses, her significant other 'husband', and other people in her online and offline social surroundings. Similar to Mona's example, the analysis explains how Nora uses her body to signify failure in her ability to conceive, and how she reproduces dominant discourses about social perceptions and gender roles around infertility in her telling.

Excerpt 2: *Forgive me*, Nora, Fertility Doll. Posted 23-Dec-2013

1 *Since I bled before my OTD [Official Testing Day] and my IVF [In Vitro Fertilisation]*
2 *failed, I've been stuck in orbit in a strange space of internal sadness. On the outside*
3 *I'm smiling and juggling life. I've worn a mask – faced the sadness alone while my*
4 *husband went to work on a different continent for two weeks, attended work parties*
5 *when I felt close to dead inside, dealt emotionally with my sister's pregnancy and*
6 *noded as she showed me her pregnancy app. Inside I'm so deeply tired of this six*
7 *year journey and incredibly sad. I haven't grieved properly because I've had to act*
8 *strong and keep myself together.*
9 *Tonight my husband said 'we're in this together.' I told him we're not because he's*
10 *been oblivious to my pain while he focused on his new adventure and work. I'm all for*
11 *self progression but when he said we'd become dull from trying to conceive, I wanted*

12 *to KO³¹ him like I was playing Street Fighter. Apparently it was meant as*
13 *encouragement that we should focus on other things.*
14 *I am filled with fear of having bad eggs. I'm mourning how badly the last cycle turned*
15 *out. I'm cursing myself mostly. I don't have energy or time to focus on other things...*
16 *unless I ditch all the proactive things I'm doing to try to improve the chances of our*
17 *next cycle.*
18 *All of this means that I haven't been chatty on here or Twitter. I manage to*
19 *congratulate new pregnancies because you girls out of anyone deserve it but I don't*
20 *have the strength to interact more or absorb pregnancy updates. Forgive me. Right*
21 *now I just can't do it. Eventually I'll emerge from the protective bubble and you'll all*
22 *have me back again.*
23 *I wish you all a beautiful Christmas – whether you're celebrating or quietly reflecting*
24 *like me.*

Level 1 positioning: Nora writes this post in the form of a 'news update' to her online readers. She describes the physical and emotional situations and the different social encounters that she had had to deal with, which in turn kept her from updating her blog. These are presented through several events (mini-narratives) as social justifications or 'excuses', constructed in relation to other people: her husband, people at work parties, her sister who is pregnant, and the online infertile audience. These are not narrated separately but are tied together in causality and effect in which she constructs self/other positions in the story.

³¹ *KO*: (Slang) A fighter who suffers a concussion and becomes unconscious from a strike with sufficient knockout power is referred to as having been **knocked out** or kay-ode (**KO'd**).

The husband's character is presented in the telling of two incidents which depict him largely as an unsupportive and disconnected husband: the first account is of his foreign travel for work and whilst there his engagement in social frivolity (line 4), and the second account relates to a recent conversation about their relationship (line 9). The characterisation and positioning of her husband indexes a particular value system in which expectations of support based on cultural values of marital roles are emphasised. He is depicted negatively as leaving her to "*face the sadness alone*" (line 3) and as being oblivious to her pain (line 10). She constructs his character on the basis of this position, amplifying his distance physically from her, describing how he "*went to work on a different continent for two weeks*" (lines 3-4). The image of a *different continent* (rather than a country) emphasises the vast physical and emotional distance between them. In contrast, she presents herself as being in combat '*fac[ing]*' the sadness alone. She expresses this emotional fight metaphorically through an affective stance of anger that she directs at her husband: "*I wanted to KO him like I was playing Street Fighter*" (line 12). This construction depicts her emotional upheaval as leading to a violent reactive strike, although this image is mitigated through the computer game (*Street Fighter*) simile that she's playfully importing. Her intense reaction is nevertheless captured in her response to his claimed supportiveness of being "*in this together*" (line 9), and is immediately rejected "*I told him we're not*" (line 9), along with his evaluation of the couple's relationship as "*becom[ing] dull from trying to conceive*" (line 11). The conflict between the couple's characters sets up opposing positions in relation to infertility: her position is established as valuing conception and as working hard (doing "proactive things", line 16) towards achieving it; whereas his priorities are somewhat different and somewhat self-centred, as valuing "self-progression" (line 11), and fun.

Similarly, Nora constructs her character as vulnerable, victimised and depressed in relation to other characters in her story too. She refers to her colleagues and her sister (lines 4-5). She asserts she is obliged to attend to others' needs. Her character is depicted as trying hard to fulfil the expectations tied to her roles. However, in contrast the other characters in her story are implicitly positioned as socially demanding and inconsiderate/insensitive. The conflict in interest between the protagonist and the other characters is linked to her infertile position and to her failed IVF result.

Her depressed character is constructed through metaphors that emphasise her weak, stressed and neglected emotional state (e.g. "*internal sadness*", "*worn a mask*", "*close to dead inside*", "*deeply tired*" lines 2, 3, 5 & 6). However, the way in which she positions herself in the stories presents her as following socially acceptable and expected evaluations of behaviour in each situation. Her vulnerably weak yet heroic (doing the right thing despite her pain) position stems from taking on dual positions for herself: on the one hand, she is a supportive social actor, who takes on a socially prescribed perfectionist position (Hewitt & Flett in Stoeber 2015) as a cheerful colleague, who attends parties and shares in the 'excitement' of her sibling's pregnancy news; whilst she 'masks' her own sadness from those around her. This dual position helps her maintain the necessary façade of strength and sociability, creating a positive impression of her as 'heroic' in fulfilling her roles, whilst at the same time constructing others as comparatively insensitive or at least oblivious to her pain.

Level 2 positioning: Through references to self in the *Discourse of infertility* "*I'm so deeply tired of this six year journey*" (line 6), Nora's account rhetorically invites compassion and alignment to the stances she takes on in relation to others in her social world. Her infertility-related social and emotional experiences, similar to other

IF bloggers in the data, are used to invoke sympathy, maintain her position as a member of the TTC group and to contribute to shared TTC rhetoric. In addition, through sharing intimate details of the private struggles with her husband and revealing secret negative feelings towards her sisters' pregnancy – details that are most likely undisclosed to others offline – her confessions position her as having an intimate dialogue with her readership. This positionality presupposes an inherent alliance to an online community that is able to understand the emotional state she's in (*"I'm filled with fear"*, *"I'm mourning"*, *"I'm cursing myself"* lines 14, 15).

Nonetheless, she elicits their approval interactively through various discourse markers that signpost, guide and incorporate the readers views into the telling. These include time indicators *"since"*, *"tonight"* that provide a sense of recency; continuers *"apparently"* (lines 1; 9; 12) that signal personal interpretive insights; and rapport building apologetic cues *"forgive me"* and second person pronouns (e.g. *'you'* in *"you'll have me back"* line 20) that consolidates the assumed closeness. The latter apology and promise formed using the intimate second person in a colloquial style, acknowledges the social expectations that result from close relationships and positions the audience as entitled to 'an update' on Nora's status. This act of positioning borrows from friendship and femininity Discourses of sharing and support - 'being there for each other' (cf. Kotthof & Wodak 1997; Bucholtz 1999; Coates 2003).

Nevertheless, similar to the offline world, Nora constructs online relationships as equally demanding *"I manage to congratulate new pregnancies [...] but I don't have the strength to interact more or absorb pregnancy updates"*. Though as a member, she constructs her blogger self as obliged to follow the social norms of presence and support that her narrative assigns to the online community *"Eventually I'll emerge from the protective bubble and you'll all have me back again."* This positioning not

only builds rapport, but emphasises the significance of the social support network (CofP) and friendship values (above) from the perspective of the blogger, denoting her relationship with the audience as real and relevant.

Level 3 positioning: The thematic premise that underlies Nora's stories (the three events, see Level 1 positioning above) seems to be that she takes her role as a wife/friend seriously, whilst others do not. Hence, she constructs herself as markedly different in her interpretation of and commitment to social duties and obligations in her relationship with others. This is enacted via the evaluative stances she takes towards others' actions in comparison to her own. She embeds her positions within traditional normative social *Discourses*. These include *Discourses* of friendship and femininity and *Discourses* of gender roles. For instance, by constructing her husband as 'adventurous' and 'on another continent', she reinforces stereotypical views of men as distancing themselves from family obligations, preferring to seek work and adventure whilst women take marriage and commitment more seriously (Cameron 1997; Firestone et al 2006; see also Litosseliti's discussion on gender polarisation 2006a:42). This is evident in other posts in the data regarding the spouses' lack of support with regards to fertility treatments (see Appendix IV for a post by Suki).

Nora's claims of an infertile identity depict the journey of IF as one that is expected to be dealt with in private and borne in loneliness and isolation. Opening up would run the risk of being considered a 'dull' and 'weak' whiner; characteristics that are unfavourable in social situations such as parties and gatherings. Although this might not be apparent here, in another post Nora directly invokes socio-cultural d

Discourses that isolate IF woman such as the *Discourse of the 'evil eye'*³² which is invoked to explain why her closest friend did not disclose her pregnancy to her (see lines 3-5, Appendix VIII). The negative social perceptions that surround IF women position them as deviant and serves to depict the space that distinctly separates fertile and infertile women in society. Thus, to avoid the risk of being considered an unfortunate complainer in favour of being socially accepted (both offline and online), she joins in the activity of establishing a separate world for herself. She deliberately offers different representations of herself in accordance with the norms of each social event she gets involved in: at work, with her sister, with her husband, and with women online.

In constructing her infertile identity, other *Discourses of femininity* are called upon, including the *Discourse of the failing body* (Ulrich & Weatherall 2000). The negative constructions of her feminine reproductive system, ("*I am filled with fear of having bad eggs*", "*mourning the last cycle*" line 14) relate the failure of conception to her physical state as a woman. This is not uncommon in the data. For instance, in a post by Suki (Appendix V), a graphic depiction of a uterus accompanied with blurbs and written annotations is used to narratively construct failure through embodiment. Constructions of the body in blogposts depict how women perceive their bodies (and their spouses') as responsible for their failure in achieving maternity/paternity, and this in turn, serves to mark their identities as infertile. Nora's use of "*bad eggs*" and depictions of herself "*mourning*" (line 15) construct a failing self (De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2015: 445). The dysfunctionality of anatomical structures is used to story the unsuccessful trials in her journey and the pain that results from it, which

³² A superstitious belief claiming that someone's deep desire for something in the possession of another might place a curse on that other, causing harm or misfortune (see Elworthy, 1985).

stems from pervasive master narratives about the roles of medicine and the female body. This, in addition to the particularities of how she portrays herself as a wife and member of a social world (both online and offline), using narratives of pain and theatrical roles of support, help to present an authentic identity, establishing what it means to be an infertile woman.

Although Nora does not allude to religious *Discourses* in this post, it is fair to point out that her religious identity is marked in other posts relevant to this stage of her IF journey (see Appendix VIII for an example). The latter example raises interesting arguments about how pain and suffering and the long tiresome journey of infertility are inflicted by God, whilst she is striving to have faith and remain strong, despite repeated failures. This positionality is not different from the discursive work presented in excerpt two (this chapter), where world-to-person social and medical *Discourses* are formed as forcefully and cruelly aligned against her, whilst she is weakly but heroically trying to fulfil her duties despite her pain and suffering.

5.2.2 Salam.

A segment from Salam's story is presented here (see full post in Appendix VII) to provide a uniquely different, yet similar, example to Mona and Nora's posts. Salam presents different representations of the self as she recounts an experience of secondary infertility (failing to conceive again after a successful first pregnancy). Salam repeatedly negotiates the dynamics of her relationship with medical and social actors in her story, aimed at constructing both a maternal and a religious identity.

Excerpt 3: *A long painful absense*, Salam, Heart of a Muslimah [subtitle: A nomadic heart on a journey of discovery!], 28 July 2011

25 *I'm 37 years old, my first pregnancy was spontaneous and totally amazingly*
26 *successful. After this I fell pregnant after 3 years to miscarry before 8 weeks. A year*
27 *and a half later, same thing. Doctors gave me the 'unexplained infertility' label and*
28 *off I went to decide what next?!*

29 *Next came the fertility doc, a matter of fact, hurried, no time for bedside manners kind*
30 *of guy who told me I don't actually have PCOS, it's actually insulin resistance which*
31 *in turn leads to infertility. Interesting huh! So I started metformin, changed diet,*
32 *increased cardio activities and attempted IUI. Guess what! I fell pregnant! Yaay! Not*
33 *really, the high lasted 24 hours after which I discovered it was an ectopic, that*
34 *ruptured and I had emergency surgery and thankfully lost only the tube, not the ovary.*
35 *Oh well, that was bad luck, never mind. So after taking time out to recover, we*
36 *decided lets not risk the other tube and lets go straight to IVF. All was great, 11 eggs*
37 *were harvested, 10 were potential and 5 were grade As! So we decided to implant 3*
38 *and see how things go.*

39 *Morning sickness came quick and was followed by the fabulous confirmation that I*
40 *had 2 healthy looking embryos growing inside me. Every scan was great, their growth*
41 *was great, the nuchal test was great. Great, great, great! Then I reached 19 weeks,*
42 *and something was just not right. Next thing, amniotic fluid everywhere (sorry for the*
43 *graphics!) And off to hospital we went!*

44 *One of the sacs had ruptured, they wanted to induce both, but then at the last-minute*
45 *said maybe there was a chance to save one of the babies so lets just wait and see. Late*
46 *that night, I delivered a perfect, dainty, button-nosed little princess named Maryam.*
47 *Her heart beat was loud and strong but with no lungs the minute she left my body her*
48 *life was no more. Ok , well its Qadr of Allah, and I wanted her but inna lillahi wa*
49 *inna ilayhi raji'oun right? To Allah we belong and to Allah is our return.*

50 *So I kissed her and let her go, she was with Allah now. I focused my attention on the*
51 *little baby inside, still strong, still with mama who was already completely in love*
52 *with her precious babies!*
53 ****(Segment removed)*
54 *I prayed all night, my husband prayed all night but in the morning, despite and*
55 *incredibly strong heartbeat, the second sac ruptured. Say goodbye mummy, I have to*
56 *leave now. And just after mid-day there went my prince, my son Mohammed, so*
57 *strong and proud, firm, yet sensitive and oh so charming, just like his Dad! I could*
58 *see the man he could have been, the boy I would have learned the off-side rule for, the*
59 *baby who took my breath away! He was leaving me to join Ya Khaliq and his*
60 *sister! Who was I to resist that? What could I offer that could anyway compare the*
61 *beauty of jannah and the company of the righteous.*
62 *My husband's eyes lost their light and it felt like his anger had scorched any love he*
63 *might have left for me. So being the heart of the home, off I went, trying to accept and*
64 *be of the sabireen (patient ones) and accept the beautiful gift of 2 children already in*
65 *Jannah! Could a mother ask for anything more for her children?*
66 *Now I needed to be a consoling and supporting wife and strong and loving mother to*
67 *my little princess at home.*

Positioning level 1: In the segment above, Salam presents her medical infertility biography as an introduction to the story of her latest miscarriage³³, describing its' particularities and how it has affected her (marital) life. The series of storied events revolve around herself as a patient, as a mother, and as a wife, placed in relation to

³³ A miscarriage is the loss of a pregnancy during the first 23 weeks (NHS.UK 2018).

other story characters including medical actors, her husband, her daughter, and God.

Medics take a lead in her construction of failure and suffering. In detailing her medical journey, she discusses “*doctors*” generally (line 27) and a particular “*fertility doc*” (line 29) negatively, referring to the way they handled her infertility diagnosis and their assessment of her potency. She emphasises, through the use of consecutive adjectives which serve to mark a positive stance, how her previous pregnancy was “*spontaneous and totally amazingly successful*” (line 25), establishing her body as ‘not totally defective’ as the doctors propose. Doctors who “*gave [her] the unexplained infertility’ label and [left her] to decide what next?!*” (line 27) are described as incompetent in offering her a proper diagnosis after her miscarriages. Her reaction implies confusion and lack of support, and places the ‘fault’ on the medical institution. In particular, she blames the infertility Doctor (who is described as responsible for reducing her chances of conceiving) as being responsible for almost losing “*the ovary*” (line 36). The characterisation of this Doctor (lines 29-32) as being ‘*hasty, ill-mannered and rushing*’ to conclusions without taking extra measures (line 29). This is used to criticise both his persona and his practice.

In addition to the medics, Salam constructs herself as disempowered by her husband and by world-to-person powers - God and life events. Her husband’s character is constructed to build a victimised position for herself. She initially presents him as a contributing actor in the shared dream of wanting twins (Appendix VII, lines 10-12), an image that is then utilised to depict the weight of his negative reaction and the attitude he takes towards her after the last miscarriage. She says “*My husband’s eyes lost their light and it felt like his anger had scorched any love he might have left for me*” (lines 62-63). He is depicted as distant, unsympathetic, and unable to deal with their loss. This positioning serves to emphasise her solitary and

emotionally daunting experience; creating yet another challenge that she has to face as a victim of infertility. Despite this, she constructs herself as striving to maintain the unity of her marriage as a Muslim woman should do: *“being the heart of the home, off I went, trying to accept and be of the sabireen”* (line 63), carrying her duties as a wife and mother (*“I needed to be a consoling and supporting wife and strong and loving mother to my little princess at home”* lines 66-67).

Her role as a mother and the presentation of God’s character are further used to aid Salam’s victimised position as an infertile woman. The descriptive physical details she offers of the lost fetuses, characterising them, giving them names, personalities and futures, and constructing them as her loved and cherished children, work to depict her persona as a loving and longing mother who lost many children (lines 44-48). Interestingly, her position of ‘loss’ is emphasized through a relationality with God *“I wanted her but inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’oun”* (line 50); *“just after mid-day there went my prince, my son Mohammed [...] he was leaving me to join Ya Khaliq”* (lines 61-64). Ya Khaliq, another name for Allah (i.e. The Creator) takes on a particular position in the way she constructs loss. He is presented as permitting her loss by not answering the couple’s prayers in *“I prayed all night, my husband prayed all night”* (line 58). She constructs Him as an unbeatable rival who she lost her battle against *“What could I offer that could anyway compare the beauty of jannah [heaven]”*. She does not, however, take a defiant or resistant stance as the self is positioned as not having a choice. God’s implied harsh conviction is mitigated by a depiction of the alternative (heaven) as beautiful, and gratitude for what she already has *“What a precious gift you already blessed me with Ya Rabb [Oh Lord]!”* (line 77, Appendix VII). The surviving daughter’s character, which is presented to aid her position as a mother, is described as a “healer” and “source of comfort” and is placed

within the *Discourse* of blessing and gratitude to God. It is through this that Salam maintains her religious sense of self and positions God as just.

Level 2 positioning: In the telling of the story, Salam positions the audience as participants in a conversational dialogue. They are talked to, lead through the topic and directed using repeated structural indices that construct them as dialogical acquaintances. This is seen in the way she manoeuvres the events in her telling e.g. *“But that’s not today’s story! Today’s story is...”* (directing her audience towards her main topic), and in the way she uses inclusive markers to draw her participants into the dialogue (e.g. ‘lets’): *“This therapy is harder than I thought! Ok let’s go back to the facts!”*. Dialogism is also depicted in her anticipation of reactions and response to them, as in *“Guess what! I fell pregnant! Yaay! Not really”*, along with numerous similar dialogical constructions (e.g. *“amniotic fluid everywhere (sorry for the graphics!)”* line 43, *“but inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’oun **right?**”* line 49). Hence, she doesn’t position the audience as merely receptive, but she anticipates their reactions and works to include them through explicit invitations to take part in the conversation - as she does when eliciting advice at the end of the excerpt *“What do I do know? Someone please tell me”* (Appendix VII, lines 78-9).

Similar to other TTC bloggers, Salam positions the readers interactively as an audience that is composed of active participants who can offer her advice and wisdom. Her position as an IF member within the group is marked by extensive use of TTC community-specific jargon (such as *“IVF”*, *“PCOS”*, and *“IUP”*) and stylistic markers (e.g. *“or should I say”*, *“Ok so...”*, *“Oh well”*, *“right?”*, *“is this a good time to tell you”* lines: 7; 23; 34; 49: 52 Appendix VII). In interacting with her audience, Salam’s acts of positioning and the rhetorical functions of her narrative position her

both *offensively* and *defensively* (Potter 1996). Her aim is to generate solidarity and alignment through positive displays of self as a Muslim, mother, and wife. However, examples of offensive positioning – mainly blame - are found vividly in the contextualization of medical narratives (see above). Through them, she alludes to a presumed shared understanding of disappointing medical experiences, which she uses to undermine discourses/positions that place the blame on her body. She also defensively constructs her character as facing constant challenges in maintaining her roles as mother and wife, linking those challenges directly to infertility.

Descriptions of her gratitude for her surviving child (the '*most amazing*' child, '*healer*', '*precious gift*' see lines 1-3; 68; 72-74), are strategically employed to validate her maternal and Islamic identities and defend her desire for more children. This allows her to avoid any potential prejudicial charges against her as being ungrateful for what she already has, by other IF members, who may not be so lucky. Similarly, by constructing her role as a tolerant and mistreated wife, she diverts blame towards her spouse and invokes sympathy. This position implies a general victimised state through which Salam construes herself and calls upon shared narratives of suffering that her readers are experiencing. Hence, these subject positions and challenged roles enable her to co-construct narratives of suffering, inviting compassionate and understanding reactions from her readers.

Level 3 Positioning: In this narrative, Salam works to construe herself as a loving and deserving mother and wife, who has been faced with failing pregnancies and miscarriages. In doing that, she invokes medical *Discourses* around infertility and constructs her maternal identity through reproducing master narratives of parental grief (Rosenblatt 2000). In terms of her sense of who she is, she re-establishes

traditional gender roles in marital relationships for herself and her husband, and utilises religious rationality to negotiate a middle ground for herself between her maternal desires and religious beliefs.

Pervasive medical Discourses that serve to position infertile women in a world-to-person direction of fit are invoked to present Salam's position, constructing a victimised identity and emphasising her loss of control in achieving her desired self. She first negotiates this disempowered position through claims of being constrained by medical subject positions. In spite of her rejecting and speculative stance towards medical personnel (see level 1 above), the discourses that these personas represent are constructed as decisive in relation to infertile women's lives and choices. Her actions clearly point to being directed by institutional advice, e.g. "*told me I don't actually have PCOS, it's actually insulin resistance [...] So I started metformin*" (lines 30-31). Here, the consequential *So* not only indexes her reactions to the doctors' diagnosis, but also proposes that she was not offered another choice. Her position is constructed as submissive, following what "*they wanted*" (line 44) and "*[they] decided*" (line 45) in terms of medical procedures. Even in instances where she tries to claim some form of agency in going through the IVF process (lines 10-12) - as indexed by the first person plural pronoun in "*we decided*" (lines 36; 37) - the contextualisation of these events within medical scenarios, using medical terminology, suggest being constrained by that jargon. This is clearly exemplified in her construction: "*11 eggs were harvested, 10 were potential and 5 were grade As, So we decided to implant 3*" (line 11) in which she appears to be echoing clinical observations. Hence, the inclusion of medical Discourses in Salam's narrative illustrates how IF positions are produced within distinct and confined medical environments/spaces that are defined by courses of treatment and medical outcomes.

Thus, Salam's claim of victimisation is endorsed by views of being subjected to world-to-person powers, where she is submissively doing as she is *told*.

Socio-cultural Discourses of pregnancy and mothering are also drawn upon to aid Salam's construction of a maternal identity. However, since this identity is challenged by loss, she manages it through invoking the social position of a parent in grief and religious Discourses of afterlife and destiny. To manage her denied desire to mother a second child, Salam constructs herself as valuing broader moral orders of reflexivity, inner power, and believing in God, whilst claiming positions of emotional 'weakness' and vulnerability (see the 'container' metaphor, lines 78-82). However, her maternal identity remains in conflict with these values. To rationalise her stance, she invokes cultural perspectives of grief and links them to religious interpretations of '*Qadr*' or destiny. Her portrayal of her miscarriage as a loss of life as indexed through using the verb "*born*" (line 21), and through referring to the twins as *my* son and daughter and by referencing the strong "*bond*", she invokes Discourses around grieving mothers. Her position is further reinforced using descriptions of labour and mothering. For example, she uses the words '*delivered*' to describe a still-born child (rather than a clinical and anonymous embryo) and furnishes the description of her child with heart-rendering human features and characteristics "*a perfect, dainty, button-nosed little princess named Maryam. Her heart beat was loud and strong...*" (line 46). A discourse of grief affords calling upon further religious Discourses used by Muslims to interpret situations in life and death; particularly instances in which they have no control and where acceptance of *Qadr* prevails ("*who was I to resist*" line 64).

In addition to establishing herself as a Muslim woman through Discourses of *Qadr* and motherhood, Salam occupies positions that are in line with normative

assumptions regarding gender roles in Muslim marriages. Her position of perseverance, as a victimised wife, re-establishes traditional and religiously acceptable *Discourses* of patience and tolerance in marital relationships: “*being the heart of the home I went, trying to accept and be of the sabireen (patient ones)*” (line 67). By occupying a traditional “*heart of the home*” role – and aligning it with God’s acceptance (as he rewards the “*patient ones*”) – she reinforces her claim to a ‘good Muslim wife’. Loss of her children and the dominating masculine macho positions of “*anger*” (line 66) and distance occupied by her husband (he is constructed as “*far away*” and as “*run[ning] the other way*” lines 72-73), are contrasted with her role as a ‘good’ tolerant wife. The latter managed through pertinent Islamic *Discourses* of ‘patience as an act of worship’. Through these *Discourses* the self is presented as willingly occupying the distressing subject positions in which it is placed.

Though this construction of herself as submissive and accepting, Salam attempts to objectively occupy positions of normativity (both social and religious), as a human who is enduring constant pain and suffering. Her closing paragraph (lines 78-82) delineates this position through the metaphoric construction of a wooden box in which she hides her pain. This box, which is described as opening every now and then to send her “*reeling*” (line 81) signifies the dilemmatic positioning between the rational and religio-morally acceptable world position of “*accept[ing] the will of your lord*”, and the unhealed pain which defies this normative position and threatens the ‘patiently accepting’ position she desires for herself.

5.3 Summary

This chapter attempted to explore the ‘middle ground’ i.e. the mid-point in MIF women’s journeys, following the diagnosis stage and prior to resolution. Through the

narratives of Mona, Nora and Salam, this chapter revealed how women reference medical, physical and social encounters in dealing with the challenging experiences they go through, as they attempt to conceive and/or give birth to new life. The three-level analysis of positioning revealed how the women established and negotiated their social roles, with a particular emphasis placed on the roles and impact of their husbands' behaviour and responses. There were evaluated in relation to normative expectations and to the physical and psychological pressures the women were facing. Further, as bloggers worked to consolidate their positions within the TTC online community, their narratives invoked pervasive medical *Discourses* and embodied images of the female's reproductive organs that were used in the narration of physical and emotional events to both establish and reject positions of infertility. Religious *Discourses* of acceptance and submission to a supernatural power were also invoked to enable positive self-constructions in relation to the emotionally overwhelming nature of the infertility journey.

Chapter Six: Results

Moving on

6.0 Introduction

Following Chapters Four and Five, which examined how IF identities are managed at the early stage and mid stage of the infertility diagnosis, this chapter explores the last stage of the IF journey by looking at closing posts. In these posts, women express their wish to end their blogging journey based on reaching a certain resolution. For some, this means going through a successful pregnancy and having a baby³⁴, for others it might be resulting to alternative methods of becoming mothers, such as adoption or surrogacy; or accepting life as a childless person. Closing posts reveal positions women take to mark the end of their IF journey, arguing for their choices and negotiating their new status within the group. The analysis shows that even at this stage, bloggers devise a diverse and complex level of linguistic negotiation to construct their position(s) amongst the TTC community. The discussion below explores their IF identity and their identity as IF bloggers within the community as they reach an end-point.

As in the previous two chapters, this chapter starts with an exploration of Mona's stories, followed by comparative analyses of other bloggers' posts (Dalal and Nora). Dalal (section 6.2) and Nora's posts (Appendix XI) revealed salient patterns that align with and corroborate Mona's example, revealing the relations and wider Discourses that are used to construct these women's positions. However, to avoid unnecessary repetition of findings, only Dalal's example is discussed in depth due to the affirming content it offers.

³⁴ Mostly through IVF as reported by five women in our data: Mona, Suki, Nora, Dalal and Eman.

6.1 Mona's Story

Excerpt 1: A different perspective, Mona, Infertile Muslim, Nov 11 2014

1 *I haven't posted in a while and I think I have finally found the words to express why.*
2 *After our FET [Frozen Embryo Transfer] in May earlier this year, I am now 30 weeks*
3 *pregnant. I somehow managed to go through the bigger part of my pregnancy without*
4 *posting anything for two reasons:*

- 5 *1. I felt guilty*
- 6 *2. I didn't ever want to be perceived as one of "them".*

7 *Why would I feel guilty? After going through so many emotions in this infertility*
8 *journey, in my darkest days I recall brewing over ugly thoughts that those who fell*
9 *pregnant effortlessly did not deserve it. Or even be disgusted at how happy and*
10 *excited couples were thinking that they shouldn't gloat. I somehow made this rule that*
11 *if you're not experiencing infertility, you're one of "them".*

12 *I felt guilty for ever having those thoughts, because when I saw those 2 lines, I*
13 *realized that it has nothing to do with who may be deserving or not and that the*
14 *overwhelming joy you feel isn't something that can be contained in any way, as with*
15 *any overwhelming emotion.*

16 *Then I didn't want to be perceived as one of "them". The proverbial them who I put*
17 *in a box and thought so badly of. A them who I labelled out of my own insecurity and*
18 *as a coping mechanism.*

19 *This leads to my reason for finally writing this post.*

20 *I've connected with many people through social networking via my Infertile profiles.*
21 *One such person recently messaged me sharing their news of adoption. I am happy*
22 *and overjoyed for her and immediately congratulated her. In that excitement, I shared*
23 *my news of being pregnant. One of her first responses was that it hurts her to hear*

24 *such news. I then shared it was after 2 failed IVF/ICSI attempts and that is was our*
25 *FET [Frozen Embryo Transfer] that proved successful. In trying to console, I*
26 *sincerely prayed that she gets to experience pregnancy as well, with God's will.*
27 *Shortly afterward, she told me that I shouldn't share such prayers with IF women*
28 *directly and should rather make the prayer privately as it [is] depressing and that*
29 *women who finally become pregnant after years can be very hurtful in the things they*
30 *say.*

31 *This took [me] by surprise and it offended me. It offended me because it made me*
32 *seem like one of "them". The perception of a "them" that I wielded when I didn't*
33 *know how else to deal. A "them" I believed had no place in sharing their joys with me*
34 *while I was in my deepest turmoil and sadness that accompanies infertility.*

35 *My intention for sharing my prayer with her was never intended to offend, I mean, I*
36 *know what the pain of infertility feels like. I only shared the prayer from a sincere*
37 *longing for her to experience what I am experiencing too. Then I realized something,*
38 *those who are going through infertility can easily build a stigma toward and ostracize*
39 *those who are fertile and even those who have managed to successfully conceive*
40 *through infertility. I am guilty of that.*

41 *I see this journey of infertility in a different perspective now that I am pregnant.*
42 *During my weakest moments struggling with the challenges of infertility, I felt it my*
43 *due to express my pain through all infertility put me through (sic). I've come to*
44 *understand and now believe that it is equally the due of every fertile or anyone who*
45 *reaches the milestone of finally conceiving through their infertility, to be able to*
46 *express their joy and share their experience without guilt.*

47 *Though a prayer might not be something that some infertile woman (sic) may*
48 *consider consoling, in retrospect I am grateful for each and every person who prayed*

49 *for me, directly or indirectly. It may possibly be that while I had the worst opinion of*
50 *some, those very same people may have been praying for what I am experiencing*
51 *today, by the will of God Almighty.*

6.1.1 Level 1: Positioning of characters in the story world and their relationality.

In this narrative, Mona reflects upon the social and emotional difficulties faced as she transitioned from infertility to pregnancy. In particular, she criticises a culture in which vilifies women who do not suffer from infertility and who are as a consequence rejected by the IF world/community. Her main thesis is that although the IF online communities are essentially created to support women in their journey towards conception, these communities unintentionally - through their own *emotional insecurities* as she puts it - act as gatekeepers that exclude and ‘otherise’ women who successfully become pregnant, including members of their own group, who manage to conceive after a long battle with infertility.

Through the rhetorical construction of her character in relation to others in the IF world, the analysis shows how Mona argues that her pregnancy should be seen as an extension of her infertility, and calls for a more compassionate understanding for those who make it through to pregnancy. To achieve this, she: 1) confirms her position in the group through constructing an IF persona based on her historical identity; 2) constructs pre- and post-pregnant stances that her character takes towards ‘pregnant others’, reflecting upon a world of IF women that defines people based upon their fertility status; and 3) supports her ‘thesis’ through positioning her character in relation to the character of another IF woman via her report of a recent event. The way she achieves these positions is detailed below.

Firstly, Mona establishes her character as an infertile woman who manages to become pregnant after failure and suffering. This position is used to introduce news of her pregnancy and to negotiate her place in relation to other characters in the story world. She sets her position up with a claim that she “[hasn’t] posted for a while” (line 1) given her sensitive position as a now fertile person (lines 6) and for fear of social isolation or backlash from the IF members (as exemplified by the story of the adopting woman lines 20-30). This rhetorical arrangement sets up a warrant (Toulmin 2003) that IF women posting about their pregnancies are often perceived negatively and positioned as outsiders. To counter this undesired subject positioning, she works to construct herself as historically infertile, embedding stories about her journey towards conception. She foregrounds her narrative by marking a staged battle with infertility (marked by timed events e.g. ‘after’, ‘now’, in “*after our FET*” ; “*I am now 30 weeks pregnant*” line 2 and references to medical trails “*After our FET...*” line 2). These temporal markers aim to contextualise and legitimise her journey to pregnancy, so resonant of others’ posts about their IF experiences of hard-earned outcomes and struggle.

At a different level, she works to claim a socially aware persona by constructing her actions as based on careful consideration and thought. Her use of the cognitive “*I think*” following the adverb “*finally*” to express how she “*found the words*” (line 1) promotes an image of a person who spent a considerable time carefully contemplating the issue. Through this position, she signals having a deep understanding of and belonging to the vulnerable TTC community and acknowledges the impact news of pregnancies have on IF members’ emotional wellbeing. More importantly, these constructions facilitate a reconsideration of the threatening ‘outsider’ subject position that she is trying to avoid.

Secondly, the characters of ‘pregnant others’ are employed to reflect upon how IF women define people based upon their fertility. Mona argues against this ‘unjustified’ division and alienation of others by depicting her own pre-pregnant and post-pregnant positions. Linguistically, she deploys self/other positions to support her argument, using markers of otherisation e.g. the pronoun reference “*them*”, instead of specifying names or using explicit referents (e.g. ‘pregnant women’) in “*I didn’t ever want to be perceived as one of them*” (line 6). The double quoted “*them*” appears six times in the narrative (lines 6; 11; 16; 31; 32) and serves to amplify the extremity of the dis-association IF women create and safeguard through unwritten rules of membership to isolate themselves from pregnant others.

The characterisation of Mona’s pre-pregnant IF persona, in contrast to the way she characterises pregnant others, emphasises her critical stance of the two separate worlds of IF women and pregnant women. Pregnant others are described as ‘happy and gloating couples’ (lines 9-10) who are discriminated against only because they are “*not experiencing infertility*” (line 11). In contrast, she describes her IF persona as insecure and unfairly judgmental in her detailed narrative. She notes that, “*in my darkest days I recall brewing over ugly thoughts that those who fell pregnant effortlessly did not deserve it. Or even be disgusted at how happy and excited couples were thinking that they shouldn’t gloat*” (lines 8-10). Here, the adjective *disgusted* is rhetorically placed as a response to the couple’s *happy* and *excited* position (line 10), and explained as a position that emerged from solitude and pain. Her dramatic presentation and graphic imagery of her thoughts as “*ugly*” and “*brewing*” in “*dark*” days, portray her infertile self as being in a depressed psychological state. Through this construction, she defensively presents her IF self as a victim of the ‘darkest days’; of being unable to conceive, whilst still evaluating the rejection of pregnant others as

irrationally and unreasonably “*labelled out of my own insecurity*” (line 17). As such she constructs her persona as one of both offender and victim. The dramatized depiction of her behaviour enables her to use her critique of herself to set an example for others within the wider IF community. At the same time, she uses her position of vulnerability and experience to express her understanding and acknowledgement of the driving forces behind other women’s ostracisation of pregnant others. This position allows her to manage and negotiate her subsequent shift in stance from negativity to positivity – to those who manage to get pregnant easily, towards a more accepting IF culture.

Thirdly, in relation to the latter, Mona introduces another person into her narrative to illustrate the ostracising behaviours of the IF community. She describes her relationship with an unnamed character “*one such person*” (line 21) as part of the ‘many people’ she had “*connected with through social networking*” (line 20). The main details given about this individual are that she had opted for adoption after failing to conceive (line 21), and that she had accused Mona of being insensitive for sharing her news of pregnancy, and refuting Mona’s prayers for her to get pregnant. These positions are essential to Mona’s argument as they allow her to use this character as an example of how infertile women can “*build a stigma*” (line 38) towards others who manage to conceive successfully. Contrastive positioning of actors (protagonist vs. antagonist) are used to build her argument, where Mona’s kind-hearted character (someone who has only good intentions in sharing her pregnancy news) is faced with the adopting woman’s judgmental perceptions and negative evaluations. Her positive stance in the interaction, in “*I am happy and overjoyed for her*” (lines 21-22), and “*immediately congratulated her*” (line 22) is constructed as being faced “*in that excitement*” (line 22) with the adopting woman’s immediate

rejection of Mona's news of pregnancy and her refutation of her prayers (line 23-24). The evaluation of Mona's prayer as a 'hurtful' and insensitive action (lines 28;29), is brought in to effectively exemplify how IF women can take ill-judged stances towards others based on their own position as they journey towards motherhood/conception.

Mona's depiction of the antagonist reflects her previous, less experienced self, prior to becoming pregnant. Her "*disgusted*" (line 9) position towards happy pregnant couples replicates itself implicitly in the position of the adoptive woman. A clear parallelism is drawn between the two women in "*perception of a "them" that I wielded when I didn't know how else to deal. A "them" I believed had no place in sharing their joys with me*" (lines 32-33), which is used to explain the root cause of the antagonist's behaviour. This construction affords a critical reading of the other woman based on an authentic position as a person who has been there/experienced that. Hence, the invocation of the adopting woman enables a realistic and very intimate presentation of Mona's pre-pregnant identity and permits a sympathetic understanding of her changed stance towards pregnant others.

In sum, through this narrative, Mona manages to shift from a position of distance to one of proximity towards conceiving couples, enabled and enacted by her depiction of self and her story characters. She carefully manages and constructs this shift, defending her persona prior to and after pregnancy. Through both alluding to constructions of her character as an IF member and using this construction to negotiate a relational position with other characters, she deploys various arguments that are designed to appeal to the IF community. The way she achieves this is explained in depth in the following level of analysis.

6.1.2 Level 2: Positioning the narrator with respect to the audience.

Mona's choice of rhetorical and discursive features in this post serve to design her position communicatively in relation to her audience of IF bloggers and readers. As discussed in the previous level, Mona signals being in a difficult position since she became pregnant, subjected to possible accusations of being boastful, insensitive or hurtful, and consequently marked as an out-group member. Accordingly, her rhetorical and communicative aim is to position herself defensively and to call for compassion and alignment from her readers. These positions are enabled through constructing herself as a victim and as an advice giver. To manage this complex positionality, Mona works to: (1) align with the groups' norms and values, whilst presenting herself as a victimised pregnant woman with an IF history; and (2) co-constructing the narrative using indices of 'synthetic sisterhood' (Talbot 1995) and re-establishing herself as an in-group member. The way she accomplishes this is explored below.

Mona aligns with the groups' norms and values and calls for positions of compassion through negotiating a victimised pregnant woman identity with an IF history. She achieves this by taking on several subject positions: a blogger, an infertile woman and a sister. These identities take precedence from the beginning of her narrative where she explains the timing of the post. The construction of "[I] haven't posted in a while" (line 1) and the explanations that follow it (lines 3-12) depict her as worried about causing pain to others, being perceived negatively or being rejected by 'friends'. This signals her appreciation of the group's norms and values of sensitivity towards others. It establishes her as an authentic friend/blogger who is concerned about the well-being of her readers - rather than a boastful pregnant woman whose success in achieving pregnancy has detached her from the suffering of others. Her

discursive acts position her character in a world of shared struggle enabling her to align with the group's moral code.

Mona further builds discursive alliances and calls upon values of synthetic sisterhood through indexing a world of shared struggles. These values are embedded and alluded to in the way in which she develops a co-constructed and interactive narrative showcased through a range of interactive meta-discursive markers (Hyland 2010; 2018)³⁵. These include “mitigation, reference to shared knowledge, to persona, status and the manoeuvring of readers to see things in the same way as the writer does” (Hyland 2001:3). For example, the way she performs taking sides with the group using ‘us’ vs. “*them*” in the construction “*I didn't ever want to be perceived as one of them*” (line 6), not only places her in alignment with the group against others, but presupposes common shared stances that are based on shared perceptions and beliefs about those others. Her construction signals similarity and performs a sisterly position of support. Explicating how the group's core values of solidarity affect her actions works to mitigate and fend off accusations of being hurtful or oblivious to the group's suffering. Through this presentation, she promotes a position of valuing sisterhood by abiding with expected IF stances; intrinsic to the groups' norms and practices, including sensitivity and consideration of others. Such claims are found throughout her narrative and constructed in relation to her status as a pregnant member - as shown in her supporting stance towards the adopting woman “*longing for her to experience what I am experiencing too*” line 36). In fact, the persona of the adopting woman was incorporated to reinforce the image of a supportive TTC-er

³⁵ Interactional markers/elements of metadiscourse are rhetorical tools that make a text reader-friendly and enable the writer to get the attention of the audience. These features can allow us to “access the ways that writers and speakers take up positions and align themselves with their readers in a particular context” (Hyland 2010: 127).

which aligns with the readers' social and moral expectations. Indeed, displaying a moral stance is a strategy that is repeatedly employed by IF women in the data to legitimise their authority (e.g. Suki, "*Is sisterhood a myth?*" Appendix II). Another example of this manoeuvring is seen in the way she acknowledges her readers' painful experiences through the epistemic marker "*I know*" in "*I know how the pain of infertility feels like*" (line 35). Thus, offering an authentic display of sensitivity and awareness, paired with back references to instances of suffering (e.g. "*in the deepest turmoil and sadness that accompanies infertility*" line 33) serves to effectively and repeatedly construct a 'shared-world' position with her readership. It works to frame a 'sisterly' pact of expected solidarity.

In addition, Mona uses her position as an insider within the group to present a co-constructed story embedded as a response to the content and interactional style of previous posts within the CofP. The performance of her blogger self in interaction with her readership positions the audience as an intrinsic part of her narration. She rhetorically probes clarifications and makes justifications and requests – both implicitly and explicitly (e.g. "*Why would I feel guilty?*" line 7). Her narration is cued as a social activity that incorporates collective evaluations, which in turn includes her audience in her act of the reasoning. As explained earlier, Mona's post is built on the basis of presupposed aligned stances with her readership, linked to a mutual understanding of solitude and suffering brought about by infertility. This creates a shared platform and marks her telling as authentically guided by her sensitivity towards others and her understanding of the complexities that lie beneath the physical (IF) concerns of this social community.

These discursive and interactional strategies consolidate Mona's role as an advisor. They allow her to discuss the emotional strain of pregnancy after infertility,

to claim ‘rights’ of expression and to call for changes of perspective that some hold towards pregnant others (who were once IF-ers) within her community.

6.1.3 Level 3: Positioning a sense of self with regard to dominant discourses.

This section details how through drawing on *Discourses* and ideologies that surround pregnancy in the IF world Mona constructs the self as a mature and logical woman.

The *Discourses* alluded to in the excerpt above fall within two major categories, those being: dominant IF assumptions around motherhood/pregnancy as a marker of social status; and religious *Discourses* of prayer, faith and the will of God. The particularities of how she employs these *Discourses* to construct an identity for herself whilst defying established norms and standards particular to her CoFP are discussed in the following.

Mona’s narrative reinforces a prevalent ‘woman equals mother’ *Discourse*, which views motherhood as a sign of femininity, self-worth and social status, and indeed, as evidence of marital success. These perceptions are implied in her construction of ‘deserved’ and ‘undeserved’ pregnancies, and signalled in the presentation of adoption as a less desired option in comparison to pregnancy, which suggest the socially superior perception of biological mothering. The latter presumption is highlighted in the position of ‘gloating’ (line 10) which connotes feelings of superiority associated with pregnancy.

The subject positions of ‘deserving’ and/or ‘gloating’ that are assigned to expectant mothers in Mona’s narrative are indicative of the world-to-person positions of women in paternal societies. As argued elsewhere in this thesis (Chapters 2, 4 & 5), women in these societies face a certain expectation to reproduce; which in many cases determines their self-worth as wives and contributing members to their families. The

description of pregnant women who talk about their pregnancies as ‘gloating’ reflects *Discourses* that mark women’s social status through their fertility and ability to conceive (see Inhorn 2003). It also provides insight to the interactants’ (in this case, Mona and readers who align with her) prevailing assumptions around their own status and bodily imperfections (see *Discourse* on ‘the failing body’ in Chapters 5 & 7). These *Discourses*, which stem from stereotypical views around reproduction and femininity, create social pressure on women who have difficulty conceiving, as it positions them as occupying a lower social status in comparison to ‘successful’ others.

Similarly, social perceptions and ideologies around the ‘options’ infertile women have when they fail to achieve motherhood biologically are also conceived and constrained by the master narrative of ‘woman equals mother’. The assumption of pregnancy being a superior and more ‘successful’ model than adoption (discussed above) is embedded in the interactional encounter between Mona and the adoptive mother twice: first, when the adoptive mother declares that hearing the news of another’s pregnancy “...hurts her...” (lines 23-24), and second, when Mona responds to her adoption news with a prayer “to experience pregnancy as well” (line 26). Mona’s prayer for a natural pregnancy corroborates the master narrative of biological conception as a preferred route to motherhood. The adopting woman’s hurt-felt response serves to elucidate the impact and power of this *Discourse*, as well as, arguably to reflect her visceral desire to become a mother (For an alternative perspective, see Appendix XI for an extreme case where surrogacy and adoption were chosen and celebrated by a MIF).

However, for infertile women, views of motherhood as the norm and as a marker of social status contribute to the creation of an alternative model of evaluation,

that is ‘entitlement and deserving’. These IF models surface in Mona’s telling, showing how she (and other IF members) mark pregnant couples as deserving/undeserving of pregnancy. She endorses IF views of pregnancy as a hard-earned gift that should not be taken for granted and should be appreciated.

In fact, Mona utilises this position of ‘deserving’ taking it on when faced with the adopting woman’s objection to her pregnancy news: “*I then shared it was after 2 failed IVF/ICSI attempts and that it was our FET that proved successful*” (line 24). By reference to her own infertility journey (in reaction to the other woman’s rejection), she invokes the *Discourse of entitlement to pregnancy*, constructing her pregnancy as a ‘deserved accomplishment’. This view of pregnancy as deserved/undeserved is often presented by IF bloggers when discussing their reaction to pregnancy news. For instance, Nora’s statement: “*I manage to congratulate new pregnancies because you girls out of anyone deserve it*” (Chapter 5, Excerpt II, line 18). particularly after so much suffering.

Assumptions about entitlement not only reflect an alternative moral order that IF women use to counter the master narratives of motherhood as a marker of social status (i.e. not every pregnancy is one that deserves celebrating - thus your entitlement to boast and share), but also serves as a boundary marker that establishes a social order within the support group. In other words, by discrediting the ‘achievements’ of couples who conceive naturally and spontaneously, IF women propose an alternative evaluation framework, one which recognises the discourses of struggle that they experience instead of evaluating them by their ability to (or not) conceive.

It is worth noting however, that despite resisting motherhood as a social marker per-se and reinforcing IF positions of ‘deserving motherhood’, Mona’s narrative reveals a complex and contradictory stance that positions her as valuing the

master narrative of ‘woman equals mother’ to support her status. In the midst of justifying her position to the IF community, she portrays her pregnancy as an achievement that is hard earned and well deserved, (“... *a sincere longing for her to experience what I am experiencing*” lines 35-36). This construction implies privilege. It calls forth some of the pertinent social *Discourses* that divide women (based upon their ability to reproduce), and calls attention to the limited social space in which IF women are positioned: as either infertile seeking pregnancy “*longing for her to experience*”; or as successful in eventually procreating “*what I am experiencing*”. The positions she negotiates moving from infertility to pregnancy reveal this, since both positions are managed through *Discourses* that are based on women’s reproductive capacity.

Moreover, Mona’s call for social maturity and fairness (*coming to understand* and giving people the right to *express their joy and share their experience without guilt* - lines 43; 45-6) and her advice to others to be realistic and appreciate pregnancy whatever it involves – does not include the perspectives of women who choose not to reproduce, accept a childless life or choose alternative options such as adoption and surrogacy. It reveals a hierarchy denoting ‘best, better, best’ accomplishments of motherhood. i.e. pregnancy is venerated and preferred. Her narrative thus exemplifies how the woman as mother *Discourse* dominates other narratives in MIF blogs.

With regards to religious *Discourses*, Mona alludes to *Discourses* of prayer and faith and *Discourses* of God’s will (as previously discussed in reference to her other posts, see Chapters 4 & 5), with a focus on particular social encounters with infertile women. In the context of interaction with the adopting woman, Mona responds to the news of adoption with a prayer: “*In trying to console, I sincerely prayed she gets to experience pregnancy as well, with God’s will*” (lines 25-26). This

prayer is however rejected and perceived as ‘depressing’ and ‘hurtful’. Rejection here appears to stem from IF group values of sensitivity towards others who are unable to conceive. The adoptive women notes that IF women can be “*very hurtful in the things they say*” (line 29) and that sharing prayer is inappropriate and should be made “*privately as it is depressing*” (line 28).

It could be argued however that the encounter discussed above goes beyond the group norms or issues of politeness and sensitivity, revealing a tension between different interpretations and positions that stem from a different set of cultural and value systems (see Appendix XI for an example). Mona’s context of speaking indexes a particular socio-religious identity as a religious infertile Muslim woman. Her contribution emerges from *Discourses* that are reflective of her own cultural context and specific Muslim group values. Prayer, which is often used as a coping mechanism within Muslim communities (see Munsoor 2019; Nahar 2010; Nouman & Benyamini 2019) is employed as a mode of social interaction, placed as a response to upsetting news as an act of ‘consoling’. Mona’s invocation of prayer is hence an attempt to adopt a religious approach consonant with her Muslim identity to comfort another ‘deprived’ woman (see Section 4.2.2 for a discussion of how Muslim women use prayers as a method of social comfort). She draws her position from her religious background and cultural discourses such as the *Discourse* of women as mothers (discussed above), assuming that the adopting woman still wants to conceive. This however was not taken up or accepted by the other lady, causing the whole interaction to seem awkward and offensive to both. Mona’s act of prayer was considered inappropriate and perceived negatively for positioning the newly adopting woman on two levels: as inferior given her choice to adopt (i.e. failing to be a ‘*complete woman*’); and subjecting her to a misplaced religious *Discourse* /perspective about

pregnancy that disregards her choice to adopt and her claim to motherhood. This is evident in the way Mona re-evaluates her own narrative style later on, exhibiting greater awareness of her group-specific identity and difference in value systems. She overtly accounts for these differences as she reconstructs self/other images to accommodate different values and socio-cultural backgrounds, presenting variations in how people perceive prayers (e.g. “*Though a prayer might not be something that some infertile woman may consider consoling*” (lines 47-48), “*In retrospect, I am grateful for each and every person who prayed for me*” (line 47)).

The latter constructions emphasise how *Discourses* of prayer and belief in God’s will are prevalent in Mona’s infertility journey and in her identity construction. They induce meanings of a preferred mode and a successful outcome that is associated with prayer, signalled by being “*grateful*” for it. Further, her narrative constructs God’s will as a determining factor in both her own pregnancy and the possible pregnancy of the adopting woman. The way she invokes God in her constructions (see lines 25-26 & lines 50-51) position Him as taking an agentive role in her pregnancy. It also conveys a common religious belief which serves to position subjects within a ‘world-to-person’ direction of fit – in which women’s ability to reproduce is ultimately determined by the supernatural. This belief is part of pervasive *Discourses* that surround infertility and pregnancy, along with discourses of prayer which Muslim women allude to in order to have some form of effect on the supernatural order (see similar, Mona, Chapter 4, Excerpt 1, lines 17-18; Salam Chapter 5, Excerpt 3, line 58).

Through master narratives of women as mothers and God’s will, Mona attempts to challenge and re-evaluate the core values of the IF CofP, whilst making claims to logical and mature positions that would aid her transitioning IF identity. She

draws on assumptions and beliefs that are collectively produced by the group's members, acknowledging and mostly adhering to its norm, whilst questioning and re-evaluating its function as a support group.

Mona's criticism of the assumptions formed around one's ability/inability to conceive and their effect in producing otherised subject positions comes across as a call for change. In her attempts to project a wise and authentic stance, she portrays herself as having once taken part in the reproduction of irrational and judgmental behaviour. However, now having experienced the joys of pregnancy she takes on a different subject position. This conflicting construction works to present her as vulnerable and empathetic towards her peers within the group, whilst simultaneously showcasing how discourses that once supported her as an infertile member are now restricting and threatening to her identity online.

Consequently, Mona's narrative shows how women's voices become constrained by some IF discourses, such as the *Discourses of 'entitlement'* and *'boastfulness'*. These reflect how fear of rejection within the IF community and social pressure may serve to silence the voices of some (as evidenced by Mona's declared absence from the group for a period of time, see line 6). It brings to the fore uncommon observations about how dominant TTC-community views may serve to police contributions and constrain IF women's voices when they do not fit within an ideal IF model.

As a member, Mona acknowledges how she worked to maintain the group's model of insider/outsider membership, until she 'realised' the need to switch to a more developed and mature sense of self in relation to perceptions around pregnancy news. Instead of otherising those who become pregnant, she proposes a view of a universal entitlement to the expression of happiness that comes naturally when such

an event is occurs, arguing that “*every fertile or anyone who reaches the milestone of finally conceiving*” (line 43-44) should be able to “*express their joy*” freely (line 44).

Summary:

This analysis has revealed how the dilemmatic shift in identity from infertility to fertility by Mona was managed by orienting to past and present self. This involved appropriating and negotiating self/other evaluations, and invoking wider *Discourses* about infertility/pregnancy and religion.

As a pregnant women in an IF community, distal positioning (the connection with her past IF identity) proved essential in constructing her current position in a bid to be accepted amongst her online interactants. Her identity work demanded rhetorical negotiation achieved through a reflection on past positions and encounters with others. Relatedly, Mona shared epistemic and moral stances as warrants for the support she requires in constructing herself as a fertile IF community member. Various IF dominant *Discourses* (e.g. ‘achievement’, ‘entitlement’, ‘gloating’, ‘woman as mother’ & ‘pregnancy as a marker of social status’) came into play in the negotiation of positions in relation to others who continue to be infertile.

6.2 Dalal

This analysis presents a further example of how the construction of a pregnant identity following infertility proves problematic, in light of the cultural and ideological world-to-person positions IF women are subjected to. Similar to Mona, Dalal works to utilise elements of her IF position and her journey towards conception to call for positions of acceptance and support from the TTC group. She achieves this by conforming to the normative infertile model discussed in Nora’s example above,

for which she claims an unstable, yet continuous infertile identity, as a pregnant IF woman. The stories and events she reports on place her in a seemingly ‘in between’ state. Her position is best understood as fluid, moving in her telling between constancy and change (Bamberg 2008). The way this is accomplished is explained below.

Excerpt 2: *The in-between*, Dalal, Blogger Kuwait. Posted 23-Dec-2013

1 *Ever since I got my BFP [Big Fat Positive], I feel very insensitive to update my blog. I*
2 *feel like everytime I read a post from an infertile friend- I feel really bad to post*
3 *anything from my end on how my pregnancy is going. The truth is, I enjoyed watching*
4 *some of you grow with your pregnancies on this blog, nomatter (sic) how much it*
5 *stung a little bit each time I started reading. But somehow- this all feels different with*
6 *me. I feel like I would be a complete jerk. But here's how I feel also- I feel like I've*
7 *been kicked out of the infertiles club, and I want back In. It's not anything anyone has*
8 *said or done, but I just feel it, and it hurts. Don't get me wrong- I've died a thousand*
9 *times to get pregnant, and thankfully I'm there (yet, not there at the same time*
10 *because who says nothing bad will happen?), but I don't feel any less sadness, any*
11 *less anxiety, or any less infertile. I still feel infertile everyday, and I carry those scars*
12 *with me everywhere I go. I cringe at pregnancies that happen easily, quickly, and*
13 *effortlessly (you can ask me, I've heard 7 pregnancy announcements from my*
14 *husbands side- ALL within a few months after marriage!). I cry at the concept of a*
15 *baby, my baby, that I still wish so dearly to hold in my arms. And the truth is, I pray*
16 *everyday, 50 times a day that I will not walk into my ultrasound appointment 8 days*
17 *from now with no heartbeat- with no life. I feel kicked out- I feel alone...and I hope*

18 *you all understand me in the most sincere way possible, because I constantly worry*
19 *about hurting you all. I don't know what to do- I just feel like im in a lonely scary in*
20 *between phase.*

Level 1 Positioning: Dalal stories the transitional phase she is going through since she became pregnant and reflects on her difficult social position within the TTC community. Realising the impact of such news on other women still trying to conceive, she relays her subjective position through the telling of several pertinent events related to how she felt seeing other women become pregnant, and how she currently feels about her pregnancy. In doing so, she claims a continuous/fixed infertile identity but one that is considerate of other TTCers experiences. She positions herself in relation to women in both her online and offline social surroundings and her baby. Details of how this is achieved are explained below.

Dalal presents her character in a story world dominated by women. Similar to Mona, she constructs the persona of an infertile blogger who became pregnant and is facing difficulty revealing this information to other IF members. She positions her character in relation to members who are still facing infertility, and members who have managed to conceive and have posted about their pregnancies. She describes her difficulty as stemming from her experience as a woman who has battled infertility, and is able to anticipate the perceptions/reactions of those who she identifies with as 'friends' on the journey. The time adverbial 'Ever since' (in "*Ever since I got my BFP*" line 1) links her problematic position to the very first moment she realised she was pregnant. It constructs a marked difference between her pre- and post-pregnancy positions: one as formerly outspoken, and another as hesitant and restricted: "*I feel really bad to post*" and "*I feel very insensitive to update my blog*" (lines 1; 2). Her

negative affective stance of feeling ‘*bad*’ and ‘*insensitive*’ towards posting about her status distances her from IF members *who post* when they manage to conceive and demarcates her character as more considerate.

In a more subtle sense negative feelings also position her as a victim of posters’ inconsiderate reactions. The latter meaning is implied in the description of how she “*enjoyed*” (line 3) reading about their pregnancies “*nomatter how much it stung a little each time*” (line 4). Here, she abstains from offering a direct criticism of pregnancy posters, mitigating her reaction with the use of ‘*no matter*’ and ‘*a little*’ (line 4), and stressing that “*It’s not anything anyone has said or done*” (line 7) that has led to her current feeling of isolation. Her choice to refrain from posting is therefore based on a more considerate evaluation that takes into account the emotional well-being of others. It is the same position she takes towards women that announce their pregnancies in her social surroundings “*I’ve heard 7 pregnancy announcements from my husbands side- ALL within a few months after marriage!*” (lines 12-13). These are presented to construe a general state of distress that infertile women face when they receive pregnancy news from other women and specifically to accentuate her position of vulnerability and sensitivity. She constructs her stance towards sharing pregnancy news as a personal preference “*But somehow- this all feels different with me*” (line 5), employing the adversarial discourse marker “*But*” to highlight her difference from others. This difference is marked with intensified evaluations when discussing the announcement of her news to the IF community online. She notes that she felt like “*a complete jerk*” (line 6), “*really bad*” and “*very insensitive*” (lines 1; 2). The latter justifying her decision to delay her pronouncement.

A position of sensitivity and consideration is necessary to maintain Dalal’s place in the story world as a member of the TTC community. It results from her

threatened status within the group, despite wishing to maintain her membership (see lines 6-7). The heightened fear of social exclusion captured in the metaphorical presentation of being forcefully “*kicked out*” from the “*club*” or group is challenged by a recognition of the root cause (i.e. pregnancy). This is managed through a series of self-realizations that construct a continuing infertile identity, including stories of her long painful journey towards the *BFP* moment and beyond (lines 8-9); about the pains of receiving news of pregnancies in the real world (“*I cringe at pregnancies that happen easily*” line 12); and about her current constant state of fear and worry that she will lose the baby (lines 14-17). These re/tellings of events all serve to legitimise her group membership and to depict her persona as an on-going victim of infertility.

The character of the unborn baby particularly functions to support Dalal’s victimised infertile persona. The baby is described as a still hard to achieve ‘wish’, a ‘concept’, an abstract idea that is intangible in (lines 14-15). Dalal argues from a position in which her pregnancy is understood as still uncertain. Through this position, she embraces the suffering, fear of loss and longing for a child experienced by other IF women; emphasising too some common misconceptions around pregnant IF women as being freed from the distress of infertility (notice the implication of assumptions vs. truth in “*And the truth is*”, line 15). She argues that for infertile women, pregnancy is not a relief, but forms yet another stage/obstacle that involves a different level of suffering, worry and uncertainty, where every moment is seen as a possibility of loss (lines 14-17). Linguistically, her use of: self-reference/first person singular pronoun with the indefinite tense maker ‘I cry’, ‘I wish’, ‘I pray’ that describe unceasing/habitual actions and re-voice stereotypical linguistic forms associated with infertility. Similarly, extreme case formulations, such as ‘still’ ‘so’ in ‘*I still wish so dearly*’ and the hyperbole ‘pray 50 times a day’ emphasise her current

position of hopeful uncertainty. These are placed alongside negative constructions like ‘I will not walk’, ‘no heartbeat’, ‘no life’ which serve to emphasise her fear of loss. These contradictory (hopeful/fearful) positions of uncertainty are implemented to consolidate the image of a still suffering and challenged individual, despite the presumed good news of her change of status (from infertile to pregnant).

Nevertheless, despite presenting claims that situate her as part of the IF community still, Dalal shows that her position of pregnancy naturally poses a dilemma. She emphasises her current struggle to find a middle ground between infertility and pregnancy: “*I feel like I’m in a lonely scary in between phase*” (line 19). To manage this ‘in between’ position her narrative works to retain her IF identity which allows for a contingent and retractable (Butler 1999) position of pregnancy given its’ instability, as suggested in “*and thankfully I’m there (yet, not there at the same time because who says nothing bad will happen?)*” (lines 9-10). By attributing feelings of anxiety and uncertainty to her current status, she calls upon a tolerant reading of her situation as an active IF member who is still facing difficulties. She indexes her need to belong and constructs a deeper meaning to her experience, promoting a sensitive, caring, compassionate and vulnerable image of her character “*I hope you all understand me*” “*because I constantly worry about hurting you all*”, “*I don’t know what to do*” (lines 17-19). These self-positions allow her to manage the dilemmatic placement she is in, using confusion and sensitivity to move back and forth between her prior and current IF positions in an acceptable and distinctive manner.

Level 2 positioning: As a storyteller, Dalal uses her narrative to co-construct events, aligning with her readers and calling upon implied and explicit assumptions that

indicate core values and attitudes of a shared CofP. By constructing herself as a friend and a co-member of the TTC online community (as explained in the Level 1 analysis above), she alludes to various positions of inclusion, and evaluates (disaligns from) other characters on the basis of this position, as shown in the following.

Overall, Dalal's story is created to align herself with her readership by indexing core values of a shared CofP, embedded within her metaphorical construction of the "*infertiles club*" (line 7). This 'club' hints at a context in which she enjoys a seemingly close relationship with her 'friend[s]'/readers (line 2). Her metaphor indexes certain qualities such as trust and solidarity, and denotes boundaries leading to the identification or indeed rejection of those who do not belong. Thus, her attempts to position herself within an IF 'club' acknowledges the possibility of a different, polarized position, where a claim of being pregnant marks her as part of an out-group (i.e. not an infertile woman anymore).

In mitigating against this position, she calls for her readers to consider her as a continued IF member and friend in the light of the physical changes that superficially index her as an out-group member. In calling for their empathy, her audience are invited to imagine her tussling between two readings of her identity in their eyes: as being an understanding sensitive fellow IF friend who is cognizant of their feelings; or as a "*complete jerk*" (line 6) who is insensitive to the experiences and feelings of IF women who are trying to become pregnant, and is turning her back on her friends now that she has reached her goal. This figurative comparison calls for a positive reading of her withdrawal from posting, which has arisen from her sensitivity to the second possible reading. She appeals to the group to envision her as a continued member who appreciates their friendship and the hardships they face. She sets this up as a reason for her thoughtful choice to delay sharing her pregnancy news with the group.

Interactively, Dalal invites interpretive and aligned readings based on the moral guidelines of sympathetic judgment and continuous support that she proposes in her narrative. She involves the audience using the pronoun marker “you” (in “*I hope you understand me in the most sincere way possible*” and “*I worry about hurting you all*” lines 17; 18) and calls upon a sympathetic reading of her situation. She also uses this marker to create rapport and convey an interactive display in “*you can ask me, I’ve heard 7 pregnancy announcements from my husbands side- ALL within a few months after marriage!*” (lines 13-14). The story prompts “*I’ve heard*” and “*you can ask me*” and capitalised word ‘ALL’ that denotes loud voice³⁶ present her narrative in a collaborative telling mode akin to offline conversations. Similarly, the rhetorical question that she poses in “*because who says nothing bad will happen?*” (line 10) is used to provoke her readers by inducing rational and emotional arguments around IF suffering, as part of her continuing attempt to construct herself as a member who is still in need of support.

Interactional alignment with the readers is also sought using rhetorical devices and linguistic strategies that construct friendly inclusion. Throughout her narration, Dalal makes use of numerous structures, typical of spoken language to present her post as informal and friendly. These include the use of active voice with personal pronouns and verbs that display affect (e.g. ‘*I hope*’, ‘*I cry*’, ‘*I cringe*’, ‘*I wish*’, ‘*I feel*’ etc.); beginning sentences with conjunctions (in “*And the truth is*” line 15, “*But somehow*”, “*But here is how I feel also*” lines 5; 6); and the use of double pronouns (“*It’s not anything anyone...*” line 7). In fact, her overuse of the word “*feel*” – repeated 12 times - is indicative of her informality, a feature that is similar to the

³⁶ Typing in all caps is Internet code used to make words look "louder" (<https://newrepublic.com/article/117390/netiquette-capitalization-how-caps-became-code-yelling>)

employment of the conflated insertion ‘*like*’ in American slang (Andersen 1998). Extensive expressions of emotions also help her achieve alignment and rapport. These are placed in agentive constructions (e.g. “*I feel very insensitive*”, “*I feel really bad*”, “*I don’t feel any less sadness*”, “*I still feel infertile*” lines: 1; 2; 10; 11 respectively). These acts of positioning reconstruct her IF identity on the basis of supposed psychologically aligned stances and shared histories with her readers, placing Dalal’s narrative as one part of many shared experiential stories of struggle.

Rhetorically, she employs various expressions that index proximity of relations, informality and struggle. These include confessional markers “*the truth is*” (line 3 & 15), repetitions “*kicked-out*” (line 6 & 17), emphasis “*very insensitive*”, “*really bad*” (line 1 & 2) hyperbole “*I’ve died a thousand times*” (line 8), “*I pray everyday, 50 times a day*” (line 15), and metaphors “*I feel kicked out of the infertile’s club*” (line 7). These features are used to navigate and negotiate alignment and continued inclusion within the group and to signal her perceived struggle. They also serve to mitigate against the appearance of her being insensitive or insincere (see Zhang 2015 on the use of ‘elastic language’ for mitigation and blame avoidance).

Level 3 positioning: The analysis here examines how Dalal positions herself vis-à-vis a Discourse that regards post-IF women as free from the distress of infertility and revelling in the joys of pregnancy. This position stems from socio-cultural Discourses about the reproductive role of women (detailed below) and often forces those who become pregnant after infertility to exhibit behaviours that signify their success, in this case: sharing updates on their pregnancy online ³⁷. Dalal rejects this social

³⁷ In another example, Dalal also rejects the master narrative that expects IF pregnant women to share their pregnancy news in the real world (see Appendix X lines 20-21)

expectation arguing that it does not conform to her moral or affective position as a woman with an IF history. Alternatively, she orients to less positive counter narratives that abound around the trials of conception and pregnancy, calling for positions of loyalty and sensitivity of perceptions/actions.

Through her reporting of ‘insensitive posting’, Dalal’s narrative reproduces and criticises common assumptions on the ‘boastful’ attitudes of IF women who become pregnant, and stereotypical subject positions of ‘abandonment’ that post-IF pregnant women are accused of. The latter perception builds on a prevailing assumption that achieving pregnancy leads to a shift in social status, which would cause members to lose their ‘allegiance’ to the group. These recurring narratives stem from a number of potential resources or social origins (Schiffrin 1996), including the *Discourse of women as mothers* and the *Discourse of infertility as a battle that one either wins or loses*. The excerpt alludes to polarised assumptions that divide fertile and infertile women purely on the grounds of procreation. The construction of an “*infertiles’ club*” (line 7) indicates this division, presenting women as members and non-members, based on their ability to achieve pregnancy spontaneously. Further, the socio-cultural expectation of pregnancy as a normative by-product of marriage is alluded to in the ‘seven announcements’ that she uses to mark her identity as infertile “*I’ve heard 7 pregnancy announcements from my husbands side- ALL within a few months after marriage!*” (line 13). The stress on the achievement of pregnancy as a spontaneous result happening ‘*quickly, easily and effortlessly*’ ‘*ALL within a few months*’ indexes the social pressure that Muslim women face to reproduce soon after marriage, particularly within paternal societies that position woman as responsible for any delay (notice how she refers to ‘from my husbands’ side’ to accentuate the pressure on *her*. See p. 59). Thus, announcements (posting) become a tool not only to

share stories of success but to shake off the stigma of being unable and incapable of fulfilling their role as women and wives.

Relationally, Dalal indexes and rejects assumed subject positions where celebrating/sharing pregnancy news is seen as the normative behaviour for infertile women. She counters this expectation with personal concerns about the consequences of submitting to such a discourse “*Ever since I got my BFP [Big Fat Positive], I feel very insensitive to update my blog*” (line 1). Her statement expresses unspoken shared values with regard to the group’s obligation to be sensitive and show empathy towards others. This obligation is understood against a backdrop of independently available conceptions of female solidarity, friendship and support. She criticises the insensitive social act of announcing pregnancies on IF groups arguing instead for her choice to do things differently: “*everytime I read a post from an IF friend I feel really bad to post*” (line 2). In this statement, a discourse of friendship is invoked to establish the self as a person who felt the impact of such behaviour, and therefore cannot ignore the feelings of other infertile women who are still battling their way towards conception.

This argument is taken further in her statement: “*I enjoyed [seeing] some of you grow with your pregnancies on this blog, nomatter how it stung a little each time I started reading*” (lines 4-5). Here, her position of ‘enjoying’ the news of others’ pregnancies precedes the hurtful impact which ‘...stung a little’. This construction refutes possible assumptions that infertile women cannot be happy for others who become pregnant. Through it, Dalal implicitly argues that it is not others’ success but the nature of such news that is intrinsically hurtful, as it immediately (‘*each time I start reading*’ line 5) reminds them of their infertility. In return, she stresses an obligation to conform to the values of support, based on more grounded infertility

Discourses that position her alongside these women, including discourses of: disappointment and perseverance “*I’ve died a thousand times to get pregnant*” (line 8); on-going suffering “*I don’t feel any less sadness, any less anxiety, or any less infertile*” (line 10); negative imprint of oneself “*I carry those scars with me*” (line 11), social stigma/perceptions of self and other “*I cringe at pregnancies*” (line 12) and emotional distress “*I cry...*” (line 14).

The abovementioned underlying *Discourses-in-practice* (Holstein & Gubrium 2000; see also Shapiro 2015) that Dalal invokes propose that infertility’s harrowing experiences should impact IF women’s perceptions and make them behave more sensitively. They work to both produce and challenge dominant perceptions of “infertile pregnant” women, enabling her to resist being positioned by stereotypical assumptions, such as her automatically becoming happy and stress free, or insensitive to friends who are on their own fertility/motherhood journey.

Dalal describes herself as repeatedly coming into conflict (“*don’t get me wrong*” line 8) with the *Discourses* of ‘entitlement’, ‘gratefulness’ and ‘sharing the joy’ of pregnancy - positions that are often used by IF women who become pregnant in defence of announcing their pregnancies to the IF community (e.g. see discussion on the notion of ‘deserving’, section 6.1.3 above). In return, she appeals to the expectation of social duty: that is to perform morally desired actions which conform to rules/patterns of behaviour that are desirable – instead of being *a complete jerk*” (line 6) towards a group of IF members. Through her presentation, Dalal adopts a didactic role with respect to others who do not hold a similar perspective. She calls upon change in the culture of IF blogging, where bloggers need to be more mindful of their emotional displays as they go through the different stages of their journey. This position could be understood within a broader *Discourse* of female solidarity,

informed by the social scripts that are part of the make-up of infertility support groups. In particular, showing sensitivity towards others, exhibiting allegiance to the group, taking positions of solidarity and offering support.

6.3 Chapter Summary

Mona and Dalal's narratives reveal the challenges pregnant infertile women face in relation to the world-to-person 'fit', as projected both from the wider offline and online social communities surrounding them. As dilemmatic as their placement of self is during their infertility journey, becoming pregnant poses another problem as they fluctuate in between their past and present identities – both with regard to self and other-positioning. Their historical identities intertwine with their new positions/identities as pregnant women, and are reflected in the way they perceive themselves and are perceived by others. They utilise this history to afford positions that permit the double arrow of movement between change and continuity (Bamberg 2010).

The following chapter will discuss these and other issues in detail, drawing together the key findings, the limitations of the study and ideas for future research whilst reflecting on their wider implications and relevance of this study to the broader research literature.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This chapter draws out key findings from the analysis chapters. It addresses how findings of this study relate to the research questions specified in Section 2.7 and to past research. Section 7.2 discusses findings that contribute to understanding the personal and cultural challenges that infertile Muslim women face, looking at each stage of the infertility journey as suggested by the analyses. This is followed by a note on unrepresentative stories in Section 7.3. The chapter then offers overall remarks on the findings and general contributions in Section 7.4. Following this, a discussion of the challenges and limitations of the study are presented in section 7.5, along with suggestions on areas of investigation for further research. The chapter ends by highlighting the study's applicability to different areas of interest and a brief summary.

7.2 Discussion of Findings

This thesis set out to investigate how Muslim bloggers discursively navigate their identities in relation to the challenges of infertility. The aim was to tease out the various positionings MIF women take for themselves, in relation to characters presented in their stories, interactional partners and the master narratives that they call upon in their tellings. The 'small story' approach was adopted as a framework, through which a sociocultural-linguistic lens was applied to the study of narrativity from a constructionist perspective. This approach afforded a flexible and dynamic analytical procedure and offered a deep interpretation of situated 'talk' as social practice (Babaii 2009).

Small story analysis, which has long been associated with interactional encounters, facilitated the study of a marginalised and under-represented group of women, looking at self-realisations within specific cultural, historical and social locations. By focusing on the discursive strategies and linguistic tools bloggers use to achieve their constructions and management of selves, the study facilitated a close examination of the personal and cultural challenges that Muslim women face in their quest to conceive and in their presentation of self. At a broader level, it enabled an understanding of the identity of the IF online blogging community itself. Through utilising an approach that is often dedicated to the study of spoken data to the analysis of blogs, a small story analysis lens provided a unique understanding of the dynamics of identity in their moment-to-moment performance (Georgakopoulou 2017) in online written text. The approach's focus on dilemmas in the discursive construction and negotiation of selves through positionality (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008), offered insight into the fluid and temporal identities women construct in the posts they write as they journey towards conception over time.

The study investigated identity construction in relation to infertility at three stages of the IF journey: the beginning – the journeying – the closure. This was motivated by a bottom-up reading of the texts that highlighted these stages as recurrent themes. The analysis of stories through stages facilitated an overall view of the (re-)construction of identities as they are negotiated, contested and adapted across time and space, relevant to different events and contexts, and in relation to varying emotional/social and medical events.

It became apparent that narratives in blogs are constructed to fit in a stream of 'shared' events that are collectively composed by individual bloggers, feeding into a particular shared genre. Storytellers launch their stories in chronological order with a

beginning and an end, allowing readers to envision a journey with a conclusion. Perhaps more importantly, MIF women utilise blogs as forms of solidarity and as venues for self-expression, particularly because discussing infertility issues are at the worst 'taboo' and are highly stigmatised topics in their societies. Their stories are designed according to specified norms and stances by the TTC community, as demonstrated through the community's jargon, linguistic indices and implied 'rules' of membership, which work to create a space of support and healing for IF women. The analysis had shown how indices of inclusion are used to achieve specific stance taking acts. These indices, endorsed with specific *Discourses*, provide individual insights that comply with, reject and renegotiate group norms and wider social expectations that come in conflict with bloggers' contextual situations and individualized stances. The small story framework revealed these tensions explicating how bloggers discursively managed their beliefs, desires and hopes in relation to (and sometimes in conflict with) normative, socio-culturally and religiously grounded expectations.

Prominent among the findings is how the performance of identity is motivated by (dis)affiliation with other interactants online and offline, and by cultural/religious orientation. The study found that dominant narratives about infertility and procreation had a profound impact on the lived experiences of MIF women. Consistent with much of the existing literature on language, identity and gender studies (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall 2004a; Eagli & Carli 1981; Eagly et al. 2000; Heilman 2012; Talbot 2019; Weatherall 2002), this study has shown how participants (readers) and social members in the offline world (who are influenced by cultural scripts), exert substantial influence on the perceptions, expectations and behaviours of infertile women. The study revealed how MIF women negotiate those perceptions and

expectations, often by appropriating religious discourses as tools to afford: a sense of meaning, connection to and disassociation from past and present selves, distancing from other individuals, and self-affirmation. Fundamentally, MIF bloggers use online spaces to enact their identity(ies) in relation to sameness with other TTC members, and difference from the dominant culture, although these positions are never fixed as they are largely context dependant. MIF identities are nevertheless found to always be constructed to fulfil the need for group belonging, self-esteem, and efficacy. A discussion of salient findings is given below in reference to each stage of the MIF journey.

7.2.1 Narrative constructions of the MIF world in ‘the beginning’.

The discussion in Chapter Four revealed how MIF women negotiate some form of ‘control’ over their ‘imposed’ infertility from the very early stages of their infertility journey. Mona’s blog was singled out for analysis and is thus presented here as a main case in the discussion of findings for its’ representative nature in relation to the positions MIF women take in storying their infertility experiences.

The three-stage analysis of Mona’s post (excerpt 1, Chapter 4) revealed how bloggers negotiated their sense of self vis-à-vis *Discourses* that posit conception and mothering as a preferred expectation of their roles as wives and mothers. They worked to redefine their positioning as agentless childless women to more agentic individuals (e.g. Mona constructs herself as a social contributor). This finding is similar to Korolczuk’s (2014) who also observed that online infertile participants produced novel forms of identity to redefine their fragmented “socially legitimized childlessness” (p. 431).

First level of positioning analysis revealed how tellers constructed their

characters in a story world that presents conception as a normative and expected consequence of marriage. These perceptions were held by bloggers themselves and contributed to by other social members. Yet, women's experiences/revelations of/about their roles as child-bearers and how these were affected by infertility, (as presented in the positioning of the protagonist), pointed to the essentiality that childbearing holds in maintaining marital relationships. This was made salient through emphasising unity and constructing positions that resist marital breakdown. Yet, discourses of procreation and 'motherhood' as central to a Muslim woman's identity were resisted in Mona's telling. Instead she promoted alternative roles and identities. She presented the self as a 'wise' and 'mature' Muslim woman/wife who accepts God's will (level 3 positioning). This powerful character/position was appropriated to positively frame her experience and existence as contributing and worthy. The presentation of self as a contributing member to society promoted a selfless, altruistic stance, through which she emphasised admirable and positive qualities, and constructed a more agentive self. These qualities, stances and choices proffered her story as unique and worth sharing with the IF blogging community.

The second level of positioning demonstrated how positions of sameness and affiliation were essential to constructing bloggers' identity within the infertile community. Mainly, stances of alignment were achieved through indexing a shared medical and psychological experience. Bloggers' responses to infertility, as in Mona example, were framed in relation other women's assumed/shared infertility experiences and attitudes towards womanhood and femininity. A pattern emerged in which reporting on seeking medical help to achieve pregnancy (i.e. body failure) was used as a tool to establish the self as an eligible member of the blogging group. In most cases, reference to a formal medical diagnosis was often used as a verifier of

‘infertility’ and as a passage to belonging to the TTC community. Following this established state, constructions of sameness in relation to physical and social experiences were evident in every single post. In relation to early narrations of infertility experiences, these were found to achieve a number of realisations, permitting bloggers to take on various identity positions such as: ‘advice giver’, ‘friend’ and ‘supporter’. They enabled bloggers to share ‘IF’ related experiences, such as physical and emotional suffering; reason their responses to social and medical subjectification (as imposed by institutional and social characters); in addition to creating rapport with the readers through orientations to ‘honesty’, ‘openness’ and ‘authenticity’. These positions worked as therapeutic strategies, inducing support and sympathy and creating a safe sharing space for their stories to be heard.

Positions created at the first and second levels of the tale world and in relation to the readers as shown by Mona and Suki’s examples (see Chapter 4 above), aid MIF women’s negotiation of self from positions of weakness and helplessness (based on their physical status), to more powerful and agentive positions that are attributed to personal traits and spiritual/religious standing. Character constructions and affiliation with the readers were found to strategically endorse bloggers’ construction of a positive self even in cases where the storied events offered a negative portrayal of their character. Although Mona constructs her character as one which experienced devastation and failure as a wife and woman, this position is not stable, but is presented as moving with wisdom, faith and strength towards ‘acceptance’ and ‘self-fulfilment’. Indeed, the devastated childless wife image, which is used to provoke sympathy and affiliation at the second level of positioning, is worked through several master discourses of religious beliefs and community service to present Mona as a strong woman who manages to overcome socio-cultural barriers. This positioning

allowed her to defy normative expectations of failure and worthlessness by choosing a different life course ('serving others', and 'holding her family from breaking apart'), thereby challenging projections of powerlessness, marital failure and lower social status that are often associated with infertile women in Muslim cultures (as discussed in Section 2.5.2 above) .

Positions of power were mainly achieved through the appropriation or reinterpretation of religious master narratives about procreation, faith and purposefulness in life, which helped infertile women achieve self-esteem at such a critical stage in their infertility journey. Although medical *Discourses* on diagnosis, results and clinical tests were invoked to interpret bloggers' statuses as infertile individuals at the beginning of their infertility experience, religious *Discourses* about contributing to society as a fulfilling objective and having belief in God's will were more widely utilised by MIF bloggers in the construction of self as infertile. They afford alternative readings of bloggers socio/cultural and physical experiences, helping them to construct positions of agency in relation to social impositions/expectations of procreation in their local communities. Notably in Mona's example, she downplayed the 'male factor infertility' attributed to her husband's impotency, instead promoting a 'faithful and wise', altruistic couple identity. Arguably, the couple's desired position (wise, faithful etc.) is in conflict with their stigmatised condition. A dominant perspective of marriage as an institution to support procreation, (which stems from hegemonic discourses and cultural scripts), is therefore refuted and re-negotiated. The religious *Discourse* of 'purposefulness' was appropriated to afford a powerful competing discourse that reinterprets' the couple's roles and permit their exercise of agency. This reinterpretation however embeds within it Mona's cultural standing with regards to marital roles, duties and

expectations. Through undermining the reason for their impotency, that being her husband, her performance showed how - to some extent - she was bounded by cultural/religious strictures.

Similar findings have been highlighted by Jaworska (2018) in her study of online narrative practices of stigmatised infertile women, where bloggers negotiate and rework hegemonic discourses on procreation and marital relationships in order to create desired presentations of self. This study aligns with this conclusion, emphasising the vital role alternative religious discourses of the sacredness of marriage, succeeding in trials (in marriage and other areas of life) as a sign of 'iman' (faith), accepting God's will, the virtue of patience, children as God's gifts and life/afterlife rewards have in contributing to positive self-esteem in infertile women, helping them acquire strength and manage their emotions (as similarly found by Domar et al. 2005; Roudsary and Allan 2011; Oti-Boadi & Asante 2017). Paradoxically, religious Discourses that often present marriage as a union for procreation and disempower infertile women are reinterpreted by MIF bloggers by using other powerful religious Discourses to overwrite the cultural expectations, and to create positive and agentic social stances for themselves towards their husbands and their marriage.

Suki's example (excerpt 2, Chapter 4) corroborates findings on the effect of dominant cultural scripts that impose/reinforce the identity of a 'successful' Muslim wife through procreation. She too challenges and/or reinterprets such scripts. Additionally, Suki's post highlights the role of third-party social characters, or whom she refers to as 'intrusive social members' who place women within stereotypical gender and social roles of procreation. Her argument refutes the imposition of a socially established order, arguing for a need to set 'boundaries' and for those

exercising their opinions to have ‘expertise’ before offering advice to others. She therefore de-legitimises the views presented by social characters who lack such qualities. Similar to many MIF bloggers in the data (also see Nahar & Ritchers 2011), Suki works to occupy a superior moral position to other women in her social surroundings. The self as ‘righteous’ is a recurring position adopted by the MIF bloggers in the data. This stance is used to take-up socio-moral positions through a bounded ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy, which constructs the author in opposition to those who see them as ‘incapable’. Rather Suki positions herself as somehow morally superior through the choices she has made to be sensitive and considerate towards others. She calls for ‘sisterhood’ amongst Muslim women, highlighting how ‘other women’ in her community contribute to infertile women’s suffering instead of offering the much-needed support. She argues that Muslim women are culturally at a disadvantage. Rather than supporting one another as they should, she argues, their linguistic and behavioural actions often cause/increase the social and psychological pressure on infertile individuals.

It should be noted however that women at this stage of the infertility journey have difficulty in striking a balance between the emotional trauma associated with the shock brought about by the diagnosis of infertility, and their religious stance and necessary acceptance of ‘God’s will’ and their destined life course. The analysis has revealed that acceptance is not always the case, as MIF bloggers sometimes alter their positions in relation to ‘accepting God’s will’ - when the course runs counter to their expectations/wishes. Women narrate difficulty in accepting this religious doctrine, especially when they are emotionally drained (also see observations by Essers and Benschop 2009: 47). The data shows how women view their situation as emotionally overwhelming and out of their control. Their display of a religious understanding of

the Islamic discourse of ‘acceptance’ is linked to a continuous sense of self, despite temporary moments of ‘questioning’. This display is vital to their self-composition, as it facilitates the management of the conflicting and dilemmatic position they are in. They affectively and discursively reject discourses that claim that infertility is brought upon them by God, as they express their suffering. In return, they show a variety of discursive legitimations to stretch the boundaries of the cultural and religious scripts, whilst creatively constructing themselves as emotionally weak but ‘good’ Muslimas (see corroborating evidence by Essers and Benschop 2009).

7.2.2 Narrative constructions of MIF identities during ‘the journey’.

Having negotiated their stances towards infertility and related *Discourses* in their opening narratives, the posts discussing the middle stage of the journey by IF bloggers discuss concerns regarding a generalised-reading of their situation. They counter master narratives by discussing their personal circumstances regarding what it means to be infertile. Their narratives stress how they struggle to face two forces: an internal one, presented through infertility as a bodily condition and a painful experience (Inhorn & Balen 2002), and an external force brought about by social and institutional actors. Mona’s narration (excerpt 4 Chapter 5) presented an on-going movement between the double arrow of denial and acceptance of infertility in relation to God, her body, and social and medical actors in her story world. Here again, findings show how religious and social *Discourses* that surround infertile women are reconstituted in their MIF identity constructions.

The first level of analysis highlighted the influential roles social and medical characters had (and the discourses they directly or indirectly represent) on MIF women. Accounts of these discourses are often utilised by bloggers to construct

victimised or alternatively empowered positions. The positioning of Mona's character in relation to other characters assigns blame and responsibility, and supports a presentation of a dilemmatic infertile identity.

With regards to institutional, particularly medical actors' impact on MIF women's perceptions of self, findings reveal that these actors are influential in relation to woman's acceptance or rejection of infertility, and to their perception of self during the journey. Medical professionals are presented as constituting a vital part of women's understanding of their physical wellbeing, their understanding of their bodies, their perceptions of/around treatments and their decision making. The influence medical actors have on infertile woman's self-perception is highlighted in the way bloggers re-evaluate and negotiate their positions in their narrations whenever a new medical test or statement is released. Many posts are written to report on medical test results using medical jargon bringing to life experiences from their medical encounters and results from clinical reports. These *Discourses* (specialists' observations, the jargon used by specialists, test results, medical arguments etc.) are very powerful in influencing self-perception (e.g. sense of success or failure) and are often used as self-validators. However, their influence does not act in isolation of other factors, such as a person's past experiences, their level of trust in the medical institution and the authority/credibility they attribute to the physician/specialist. Factors such as these explain why medical *Discourses* are sometimes refuted (e.g. Salam's narrative, Section 5.2.2). A main observation in this study is that the medical *Discourses* presented in IF bloggers' narratives belie the changing and dilemmatic placement of self during the infertility journey. Medical arrangements, test results, and different medical treatments are reflected and impact on the variability of self-construction at different points in time: that is, how women display different positions

with regards to their infertile experience (accepting, rejecting, negotiating etc.) in each post along their journey.

Story characters, including pregnant women and other women in their communities are presented as both stabilising and destabilising actors. They are stabilising in the way they present and establish the social needs/norms that are drawn from popular culture, historical contexts and religious interpretations. IF women are subjected to detailed regulation (of their choices, actions and conduct) by story characters who often draw on fixed narratives of ideal femininity (i.e. women as child-bearers, wives who are responsible to undertake assumed duties, etc.). Narratives by Mona, Suki, Nora and Salam (see excerpts 2, 3, 4, 5 in Chapters 4 & 5) revealed how MIF women internalize culturally assumed feminine roles and Discourses that insinuate infertile women's incapacity as women. Infertile women internalise these cultural expectations, at times attempting to conform to them and at other times contesting them.

Overall, the story characters presented and the normative Discourses they invoke construct an overarching negative stance towards infertility. The study shows how by questioning the actions/intentions of such actors ('*other women*'), and by arguing from positions of wisdom, logic and righteousness, critical shifts and tensions emerged which disrupted these stable narratives. These were expressed through 'double voicing' (Bakhtin 1994) – i.e. narrators expressed controversial or disruptive views through (invented or reported) characters in their telling. '*Other women's*' narratives/positions were presented in bloggers' stories in order for an argumentative frame to be established – an 'us versus them' dichotomy. In this way MIF story-tellers counter dominant Discourses and construct alternative perspectives. In their storying they denied or rejected the views proffered by the other women in their stories who

they depicted as ignorant, intrusive and insensitive. The emotional impact of the position and actions of these story characters also brought to the fore feelings of isolation and alienation experienced by the MIF women, for they are positioned as deviant and different from the 'dominant culture' because of their 'biological deficiency'. (The latter corroborates findings by Inhorn (2004), Papreen et al. (2000) and Hussain (2009) who report on the stigma felt by married Muslim women who are not able to have offspring).

The behaviour and actions of other '(fertile) women' lead them to be destabilising actors in the story world - driving bloggers to call for social change. Mona expressed a demand for social acts/Discourses that 'preserve the norms', to be altered, as they do not serve infertile women well. Rather she calls on all to develop a 'sisterhood' imbued with 'compassion' and 'solidarity'. This appeared as a more powerful and favoured position in multiple posts (see Mona, Suki, Nora's posts Chapters 4 & 5). Blogs were found to provide a space in which discourses and positions about womanhood and hegemonic masculinity were challenged, (as similarly documented by Riessman (2002) in her analysis of infertile Asian women's accounts and in Inhorn's (2003) work on male fertility in Egypt). Notably, positions of contestation to the normative discourses around procreation are found to be more vigorously contested and more explicitly articulated in later posts as the infertility journey becomes established.

At the second level of positioning, findings show how bloggers utilise discourses of belonging and similarity with their audience. They perform sociality by constructing an insider perspective to the Community of Practice (CofP), replicating the group's style, e.g. indexing 'friendship talk' through an informal layout and 'confessional' narratives, and through setting expectations of an interactional

association based on mutual experiences. The rhetorical aim is to construct an interactional alignment with the TTC community and to present the blogger as 'authentic'. This corroborates findings elsewhere which argue for the pivotal role authenticity plays in adding social value to perceived authentic presentation (Herring 2003; Hew 2011; Page 2013; Seargeant & Tagg 2014;) and providing an anchor for communication on which a level of trust is built between participants on-line (Kane et al. 2014; Page 2013).

A discussion of findings related to author-positioning to readers (level 2) cannot be fully grasped without tapping into master narratives that are drawn on to present familiarity and invoke alignment. Findings show that bloggers present the infertile self as both 'authentic' and 'familiar' by projecting the self as being in a physically and socially disadvantaged state. These positions are presented as 'shared' by fellow infertile readers who are addressed as 'friends'. Being infertile is portrayed as a 'shared' state, characterised by struggle and frustration with several failed attempts at conception. Discourses about 'the body' are utilised to argue for this shared state and to project the generally imposed and powerless positions that infertility entails. Physical experiences are constructed against a backdrop of common conceptions about sexual reproductive health that view women's bodies as having a natural capacity to conceive. They allude to and embrace a dominant understanding of femininity as being embedded in their biological body and reproductive organs. Expressions used to discuss women's frustration over not being able to conceive such as having 'bad eggs' or a failing 'uterus' are commonly used and mark their bodies as defective, inducing notions of the subject as being less of a woman³⁸. In Mona's

³⁸ See Solbrække & Bondevik (2015) and Whitehead (2016) for enlightening studies on infertility and femininity.

example, she presents her inability to conceive as a biological failure, which in turn positions her as failing to fulfil her role as a wife and a woman. This finding is pervasive in the data, as IF bloggers often present the failing body to call for alignment and build a mutual narrative. These presentations associate women's desire to become mothers with master narratives of physical femininity, discussing their age and biological timeline as added barriers towards their desired state. Assumptions around age and procreation (e.g. "*I turned 30 and my proverbial biological clock seems to be ticking ever louder*" Mona, Appendix IV) and assumptions about the performance of female organs are commonly produced by infertile women online and reflect positions of self-blame. The way they are constructed however, reduces infertility to a discussion of the subjects' reproductive organs (e.g. Suki's narrative "WTF Uterus?" Appendix VI). Although such embodiment risks affecting the coherence of the self through fragmentation (where the 'uterus' or 'bad eggs' are to blame for example), such constructions are utilized by bloggers to make the problem more tangible, enabling them to present their experiential suffering to themselves and their readers. They also serve to distance the problem from the personal – making it a clinical exposition. Bloggers empathise with these constructions, presenting their own and assuming other TTCers' 'defective' physical states. Their constructions align with a hegemonic cultural definition of femininity/infertility that builds itself around pervasive assumptions on gender roles as being linked to the body.

In addition to physical barriers, social barriers are also presented to construct the imposed and powerless positions that come with infertility. As with the physical experiences described above, uncomfortable social experiences and encounters are alluded to. By sharing these negative experiences, bloggers use their narrative space to present the self as empathetic to other IF-blog readers who are going through

similar experiences. As with Mona and Suki's examples above, Nora and Salam's stories (excerpts 5 & 6, Chapter 5) show how the construction of the body and the socio-religious and medical contexts inform the perception of self. These revelations are similar to those reported in Jaworska's (2018) who found that women use confessional narratives of illness to form and transform their identities. Results also complement findings by Piela (2012), who suggests that emotional connections and support form the basis on which women interact and construct/maintain sisterhood online. Indeed TTCers' stances serve to bolster connections online, as the socio-cultural challenges faced by these women help to build a network of familiars. Their stances are further utilised to call for a change, demanding that social acts which stigmatise IF women be altered towards a more sensitive reading of their situation.

The third level of analysis has shown how socio-cultural, religious and medical Discourses on fertility and the reproductive role of Muslim women are entwined in Mona's construction of self. The wife identity is presented in relation to master narratives of the reproductive role of Muslim women. Mona, as well as Salam, Dalal, Nora and even Leila (who argues for alternative ways to parenting), all work to perform a 'feminised' identity: one that reflects traditional heterosexual ideologies that view pregnancy and childbearing as the norm. Mona's narrative constructs her 'wife' position in relation to Discourses of 'support' and 'sacrifice', constructing her position of support as an 'obligation'. Although Mona's account clearly identifies the husband as the cause of the infertility problem, as the diagnosis initially shows, the self as infertile gradually takes over in the telling. The presentation of the diagnosis as a joint accomplishment and trial slowly de-emphasises the husband's role in her account alluding instead to the infertility of the couple, an identity that she then embraces 'alone' in following posts. Indeed, Inhorn (2002) similarly found that male

subjects rarely bear the stigma of infertility whereas women often carry the burden. Positions of 'duty' and 'sacrifice' in marriage are by no means unique to Muslim women, as shown in other studies (e.g. Johansson & Berg 2005) that have investigated the social and cultural aspects of women's reproductive experience and emphasised the centrality of the infertility experience on a woman's sense of self (see discussion above on p.54). This study, however, illustrates the complex subjectification processes of Muslim women's identities, given their desired claims to positions of faith, wisdom and belief in God's will. Powerful cultural *Discourses* and assumptions around procreation have a profound impact on infertile women, which they internalise and resist in part, using counter religious/ideological narratives to construct agency for themselves. Infertile women's identities are thus found in constant negotiation and flux in relation to fertile social members (particularly other women).

This study has found how hegemonic discourses around procreation and *Discourses* around femininity and the body (mentioned earlier) reflect a dilemmatic self in terms of identity construction, where the self could be presented as insightful and wise at times, victimised at others, even deviant and deficient. As found by Essers and Benschop (2009), this negotiation often includes pushing and reconstructing social and ideological boundaries between Islam, gender, and cultural boundaries, making identity construction complicated as multiple social categories are involved. The multiplicity of self-presentations presented in the narratives analysed attest to how the infertile self is fluid, multidimensional, and intrinsically affected by (but not entirely constrained by) the abovementioned *Discourses*.

It must be stated that Mona's accounts of duty and sacrifice, and her construction of the couple's 'togetherness' were not representative of the entire data

set. For example, Nora and Salam's stories (excerpts 5 & 6, Chapter 5) expressed alternative positionings and points of view. They depict their husbands as failing to provide the support they expect, discussing how the burden of infertility is often placed on the woman. In contrast to Mona's account, Nora and Salam's positioning of themselves in relation to their significant others points to the isolated spaces in which IF women reside. In fact, in a significant and revealing post (Appendix IV) Mona also expresses a different perspective of her story, describing how hard it is for her to carry out her life as normal in light of the couple's infertility and her husband's demand for secrecy. She describes how this has placed her in an isolated and depressing state. Such experiences cause bloggers to either withdraw from social encounters, or 'wear a mask' as Nora puts it.

Nevertheless, IF bloggers constantly rework their narratives of self-blame, trauma or victimisation to claim agency in their life choices and with respect to attitudes towards unwanted worldly positions. Religious *Discourses* around God and fate are utilized by MIF women to project some form of authority in their construction of an infertile identity. In Mona's example, God is an empowering agent, who she invokes to renegotiate her emotional struggle with her 'tests in life'. Mona's approach to constructing infertility as a 'test' from God reforms the whole infertile position to work in her favour. Mona, and most other MIF women's stories, use religious *Discourses* as an interpretive frame that enables them to manage their identity effectively, negotiating contradictory positions of 'self' as supportive, religious wives, and as vulnerable woman struggling with denied motherhood. By reconstructing 'infertility' as the will of God, infertility becomes a less intolerable state, where one's vulnerability, failures and pains become part for a highly awarded 'test' if one succeeds. Instead of being a victim, the self is viewed as 'chosen' for a test of faith

(e.g. Salam Appendix VII). This enables a re-framing of the infertility story, re-conceptualising her disadvantaged position with an alternative empowering *Discourse* that supports one's roles and marriage. Indeed, similar findings are reported by Essers and Benschop (2009), Hassan (2018), Piela (2012), and Zaman (2008), who argue that religious *Discourses* provide narratives to enable MIF women to reconstitute a positive identity and manage their disempowered positions. They enable them to rework their infertile identity according to both their current realities and suffering, and their Islamic beliefs.

7.2.3 Narrative constructions of MIF identities in closure posts.

The transitional phase from infertility to pregnancy revealed various tensions regarding the construction of self in the IF world. Contrary to one's expectations, this study found that MIF women do not exhibit 'end of story' positions of achievement and celebration at this stage, but work hard to counter assumed subject positions of insensitivity and lack of consideration that are stereotypically assigned to pregnant women by the IF group. They document rejection or fear of rejection because of an existing culture of 'othering' towards women who do not suffer from infertility. The study highlighted how IF online communities that are intended to support infertile women work to block out and reprove 'achievement' positions displayed by successfully pregnant women - including members of their own group – when they manage to conceive.

Mona's closing post (excerpt 7) reveals a complex and nuanced rhetorical construction of her character in relation to others in the IF world. The first level of positioning shows how she reports on her fear of social isolation and backlash. She alludes to possible accusations of boastfulness and insensitivity if she posts about her

pregnancy in the TTC community. This is reflective of an underlying culture within the TTC community in which women who manage to conceive are re-evaluated and become outcasts. She works to criticise this culture, deploying her historical identity as an infertile woman and a victim, and takes on a didactic role with respect to others who take an anti-post-IF pregnancy perspective. This, and other infertility and victimisation positions are taken on by Mona at the referential level to construct and support a socially acceptable persona as a pregnant IF member. A major finding in this respect reveals that infertile women work hard to legitimise their status in the group at each stage in their journey. Such legitimisations become more complex and demanding when positions of 'sameness' are less evident (e.g. achieving pregnancy). As with Mona, Dalal's story (excerpt 8, Chapter Six) shows how constructing 'belonging' within the IF community takes priority once IF bloggers become pregnant. She too utilises her IF identity and personal history to call for positions of support and alignment from her readers, presenting an on-going vulnerable and victimised position as she too reports on ostracising subject positions.

Mona's identity work at this level includes constructing positions of social acceptance and authority. Her positions manoeuvre between arguing for a compassionate reading of her position and working to influence change within the TTC community.

At the second level of positioning, she takes on the position of a woman who is subjected to 'stigma' in order to imbue empathy from her readers. However, given her highly stigmatised position as a pregnant woman amongst an infertile group, she tactically projects the identity of an ally. This ally is presented as a member that appreciates the norms and the difficulties other infertile women go through, and who works hard to adhere to the group's moral codes and values (see Whitehead 2013 on

gaining acceptance in online communities). Such performances are found to be preferred positions that IF bloggers create when facing exclusion. Performances of sameness, discursive alliances and constructions of synthetic sisterhood, are used strategically to link them (as members) to the group's core values and to call for acceptance. These findings point to the way collective evaluations are rhetorically incorporated to justify and reason bloggers actions, enabling them to assert their claims and dispel accusations.

In relation to master narratives invoked at the third level of positioning, Mona's call for a more compassionate stance towards pregnant women points to the segregated spaces in which pregnant and infertile women are assigned. She indexes a culture of separated worlds where "them" meets "us" (i.e. fertile and non-fertile women³⁹), through which she bears witness to both the allied world of women who battle infertility, and the social stratification system that these women utilise to preserve their social order and the unity of their support group. This links to discussions surrounding world views or a 'shared consciousness' that unites infertile women whose perceptions of infertility as unfair and unjust are often shared (Whitehead 2013). Interestingly, unwritten rules of membership and inclusion criteria that TTCers use to create and safeguard their online social groups and join them together, inadvertently works to isolate them from those who are outside the TTC world. It separates them from other women who do not fall within the specified criteria, and deepens the gap between infertile and non-infertile persons, including women in their local communities. Mona's dilemmatic positioning of self as an infertile woman who became pregnant reflects this. The alignment she projects with women in both worlds signal her appeal to narrow the gap between IF/non-IF

³⁹ See Lange (2015) for more on this division in online IF communities.

individuals, and to promote a more tolerant appreciation of alternative versions of infertility. She calls for the online world of TTC to take into consideration the physical and emotional experiences individuals go through, seeing them as joined by the desire to become parents. Her claims nevertheless shadow existing dominant Discourses around motherhood and femininity as the ideal path towards parenting— as argued in Chapter Six – which are addressed below.

This study has shown (as exemplified by Mona’s narrative and corroborated by other bloggers positionality) how dominant IF assumptions around motherhood as a marker of social status stem from the social position that Muslim women occupy, and from prevalent assumptions around pregnancy that are shared in the IF world. A main observation is that pregnancy is viewed as a superior and more ‘successful’ model of motherhood than other available choices such as adoption. Bloggers in this study reflect a view of biological motherhood as a marker of social status, despite their largely mitigated representation. These positions surface in women’s constructions of both their pregnancies and their IF-related positioning of self/others. Adoption, for example, was found to be constructed as a less desirable option in comparison to biological motherhood, thus indicating an underlying social perception that values natural reproduction in the creation of a family. This is reflected in the utilisation of notions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ pregnancies, which was a recurring theme in this study, used as a means of legitimisation in the IF communities. These notions appeared in the way IF women discount pregnancies that happen easily (see Mona and Dalal’s excerpts, p. 164; 172), and value discourses that portray pregnancy as a gift and an achievement.

The notion of a ‘deserved pregnancy’, created by IF members to distinguish their pregnancies from others, places certain challenges on them. Their narrations

reveal how they resist and challenge particular aspects of prevailing discourses that circulate in the IF community, which could mark them as inferior. For instance, pregnancy is marked as ‘deserved’ if it comes after suffering and is constructed as ‘under-appreciated’ if it came naturally and easily. This assumption is reflected in the way IF women emphasise their IF experiences, reminding readers of who they are and what they believe in as IF members. It reflects the moral order that IF women use to counter the master narratives of motherhood as a marker of social status (i.e. not every pregnancy is one that deserves celebrating/sharing). It serves to mark an ideological stratification to construct and reinforce a social order within the support group. By discounting the achievements of those who become pregnant naturally, they create a safe and bounded territory.

Similar to the earlier stages of pregnancy, religious *Discourses* play a vital role in Muslim women’s management of positions of uncertainty brought by their transitioning phase from infertility to pregnancy (see similar findings by Jennings 2010; Roudsari & Allan 2011; Roudsari et al. 2013; Burner 2012; Elgohail 2017 and Lange 2015 on the relationship between religion and infertility). Prayer, for instance, acts as an enabling discourse that provides alternative modes of narration about life events (see similar findings by Munsoor 2019). When the adopting woman refuses Mona’s prayers for her to become pregnant (see excerpt 6, Chapter 5), Mona declares that it is one’s choice to accept or refuse that a greater power dictates the course of their life, but she goes on to construct the adopting woman’s position as absurd. She makes clear that it is the power of those ‘prayers’ that enabled her to achieve pregnancy. For many infertile Muslim women, a religious approach to infertility positions God as the determiner of the ‘world-to-person’ subject position in which they are placed. They orient to *Discourses* of prayer, destiny and God’s will to

consolidate their management of the powerless imposition and to facilitate the social reconstruction of a more powerful IF position. This enables them to project a logical and mature identity, and to manage their transition to motherhood taking into consideration the experiential journey and probabilities of failure.

In sum, the analysis of bloggers end posts reveals how at the final transitory stage of infertility, MIF women take on a reflective persona, bridging their infertile history with their current context. It shows how they construct a hybrid identity as a person 'in-between', performing similarity and holding on to IF identity – indexed via accounts of uncertainty, suffering and tribulation, whilst carefully claiming their new identity as pregnant women. Bloggers display multiple positions that reflect a state of inbetweenness between fertility and infertility, which threatens their status of inclusion within the group. To manage this dilemma, they utilise positions of alignment and inclusion, enacting preferred positions that accommodate to the groups' core values, such as trust, solidarity, and recognition of others. At the same time, they disalign with personas that they construct as 'insensitive' to pregnant members, revealing stereotypical dispositions of 'disloyal' members in which post-IF pregnant women are often placed. TTC bloggers often call upon moral stances of responsibility and sensitivity and endeavour to demonstrate empathy towards each other and construct themselves as considerate 'friends of the journey' who possess a shared history. This display permits the presentation of an authentic self (see Christians et al. 1993; 2012) promoting themselves as a persistent and dedicated IF member and experienced/authoritative contributor to the group. This shows how authenticity and experiential knowledge are used to legitimize bloggers' emotional judgment and influence IF women's perceptions of pregnant others.

7.3 Post-note: Unrepresentative Stories

Although pregnancy is the most common conclusion to the battle of infertility in the dataset (8 out of 10 women analysed for this study achieved this status), there are cases in which pregnancy remains unattainable. Given the limitations of space, this thesis could not shed light on these different scenarios. However, it is vital that the existence of these representations is recognised, as they are promising for future research.

IF bloggers such as Leila and Arche in our data set (Appendix XII; XIII) present other examples of situations where IF women alternate to other options when pregnancy is unattainable. Arche adopts a position of accepting a childless life, employing wider discourses of self-fulfilment to justify and consolidate her position. Leila on the other hand presents a narrative that encapsulates how socio-cultural and religious discourses around infertility are limiting to infertile women and by extension, herself. She criticises those confinements and challenges them by choosing the uncustomary (to MIF's) path of adoption and surrogacy.

In general terms, the analysis of these narratives revealed consistent findings with the direction of this work. Social and religious perceptions around infertility remain at the heart of women's self-realizations, however they too defy them at times e.g. as in the case of adoption and accepting them in the case of embracing childlessness.

Complexities are involved in constructing post-infertile identities, as they are marked by previous IF positions and conceptions that are instilled in MIF women's constructions of self. Dominant discourses (social, medical and religious) are major contributors to the isolation and stigma that immobilises Muslim women's self-concept in all cases.

7.4 Contributions to the Literature and General Remarks

This study addressed an under-researched area through investigating the sociocultural and contextual effects of infertility on individuals (Becker & Nachigall 1991; Cousineau & Domar 2006; Wilson 2014; Greil et al. 2010). It uniquely applied a linguistic focus to looking at infertility in narratives, to scrutinise functional and rhetoric manifestations and to expose powerful/hegemonic ideologies in discourse. Findings of this study corroborate recent post-structuralist and social constructionist work on identity similarly revealing its emergent, constructed, negotiated and situated nature in discourse. By investigating the how and why of identity construction in narratives (blogs) of infertile Muslim women, this study has contributed to the literature on identity in relation to gender and religion, confirming the effects broader social and local interactional context have on self-formation (cf. Riessman, 2003; Conway 2008; Presser 2005; Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Bucholtz 2011; see also De Fina 2010; Sarangi 2010a; 2010b; Sarangi and Roberts 1999).

This study has also contributed to the literature on narrative, in particular small story approaches to the study of identity in narrative (cf. Bamberg 2008; 2010, Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008). An original contribution that it makes is through attempting to synergise with ‘big data’ through a focus on the local. With a focus on the contextualisation of the phenomena, the study utilised a clinical ethnographic examination as presented through interactivity in written stories online, thus bridging approaches that focus on spoken discourse with the language of digital media. The study contributed by attempting to do justice the complexities of social phenomena, qualitisng the study of bigger data, and using a performative action-oriented approach

with the utilisation of linguistic tools. These tools facilitated the presentation of a thick description of discursive activities across time. Through the small story approach, the study was able to scrutinise cultural/rhetoric manifestations and expose powerful hegemonic ideologies.

The abovementioned contributions are presented as part of research on new media within these areas (i.e. gender, sex, and other identity studies in new media, and narrative in new media).

Based on the main theoretical premises proposed in this study (Chapters 1 & 2), and in light of the findings of this investigation of Muslim infertile identity online, the following general remarks are offered to highlight the study's theoretical contributions to the literature on gender, identity and identity representation in new media. For the purpose of coherence, remarks related to the online identity, the blogging community and bloggers' self/other interactional achievements (level 2 positioning) are presented last.

7.4.1 Constructing a Muslim infertile identity.

The infertile identity did not occupy a simple victimised position, but presented a hybrid identity that reflects an agentic persona. MIF women made claims to identities that are available or denied, and constantly worked to negotiate, adapt and contest societal subject positions (see Gao 2018). Discourses about motherhood, procreation as a natural and expected by-product of marriage, and childbearing as a sign of femininity were re-worked and negotiated through religious Discourses to exercise agency as similarly found by Jaworska (2018).

The study found that the construction of a MIF identity often entailed the management and intersectionality of a triad of identities, for example, the 'wife',

‘infertile’ and ‘Muslim’ identities. The performance of these identities involved a considerable level of complexity and variation. For instance, an infertile identity was evidently produced in intersection with a Muslim identity to construct specific roles and duties; while the ‘wife’ identity was constructed in relation to being Muslim and infertile to exhibit ideal self-positions. In addition, the latter identities do not represent single coherent categorisations, but gradient of positions tied to local sites of tellings and to individual identifications. For instance, the category ‘Muslim’ is less present when Nora (Ch.5, excerpt 2) wishes everybody a beautiful Christmas, whilst Salam and Mona hold prayers (same chapter) promote more religious positions. It should be noted however that the intersectionality of identities in MIF women’s tellings in this study have not been comprehensively explored, and therefore should not be assumed as confined to the above examples. Such complexity merits a study in its own sense looking at how intersectionality emerges in local sites of interaction. It was evident, however, that one or more identities took precedence in relation to the others at different sequences during a particular telling (see studies by Levon and Mendes 2016; Pichler 2011 for similar findings on the intersectionality of identity performance in interaction).

7.4.2 Infertility as a heteronormative narrative.

This study corroborates findings by feminist researchers on the impact of social and cultural expectations and norms on women’s reproductive experiences (see Chapter 2). Women in this study report on ongoing experiences of negative emotions such as grief, lack of control, anxiety, fear, resentment, envy and social isolation (as similarly reported in Annandale & Clark 1996; Bell 2013; Culley et al. 2013; Inhorn 1994; Inhorn 1996; Inhorn & Balen 2002; Letherby 1997; Letherby 2002). Narratives of

trauma, self-blame and narratives in which the body was constructed as ‘defective’, were found to dominate a large part of MIF women’s self-constructions, even in cases where male infertility was evident (see p.130). This echoes and reinforces assumptions about women’s role in childbearing (Chafetz 1991; Donovan 2008), which renders the inability to reproduce a ‘woman’s problem’.

Adopting a small story analysis approach to the study of narrative in blogs permitted the exploration of identity in context and across time. This has shown that throughout different stages in their journey, MIF bloggers identify as victims in regard to their infertility experience, to the hegemonic *Discourses* that produce and confine their roles, and to social actors in their surroundings. At the first level of positioning, it became clear that certain actors have a great impact on TTCers’ sense of self, perceptions of the world and identity presentation. ‘Other women’ (offline in their social surroundings, and online), their husbands, and God, all serve to act as important and salient characters in the stories. These are invoked to communicate and construct women’s positions as woven from complexities and variations that are tied to local sites of interaction in which their identity is enacted (see Pichler 2011). Women’s negotiations of their positions in the stories they tell entail self-presentation or impression management, where they contrast themselves in relation to ‘normalising judgments’, to an ideal image/role that is assumedly accepted by the community they are interacting with (Goffman 1959). These self-constructions are predominantly communicated in relation to social heteronormative norms (Butler 2003) and other relevant social stratification systems (Levon & Mendes 2016, see Section 2.5.1) related to their roles as women, mothers and wives (more on this below).

7.4.3 Constructing femininity in infertility stories.

The analysis of positions in stories highlighted the way in which MIF bloggers work hard to assume their roles as females in the social hegemonic demand for compliance, defending their positions in alignment with those roles or countering those expectations/demands. MIF bloggers femininity is, (as found by Kiesling (2011) and Cameron's (2001) in their study of gender effects in speech communities) largely constructed and policed by social actors (other women) who demand and maintain assumed heteronormative social roles, 'folk' medical narratives and a selection of religious *Discourses* that serve the normative social narrative. Their assumptions and expectations create a powerful narrative force that restrict MIF women's claims to a desired self (Alsop et al. 2002; Perrino 2018). This finding was evidently and repeatedly found in bloggers' reporting of social encounters with 'other women' and with influential social members (e.g. husbands, close friends, sisters). It was also surprisingly found in some reports on encounters with online female TTC members who work to reproduce and maintain the heteronormative social order in cyberspace.

Women's reports on their interactions with online and offline members showcase how resilient master narratives on procreation, femininity and culturally assigned social roles are and how they define and limit bloggers expression of experiences. They revealed various tensions in the discursive practices between the multiplicity of selves, including (but not limited to): the self as a woman, as a female, as a wife, as a Muslim, and as a member of the TTC community. Infertile persons subjectively locate themselves and other characters in their telling. They jointly and interactively construct self/other positions through assignments of roles and invocation of social, religious and medical *Discourses* that support the preferred self at the time of the telling (see Essers & Benschop, Hassan 2018, and Piela 2012 for similar observations). Powerful *Discourses*, such as discourses related to infertility,

failing organs or ‘the failing body’, ‘diagnosis’ and about ‘preserving marriages’ and ‘serving a higher purpose in life’ were used by bloggers in creative ways to construct and assume femininity, negotiate heteronormative norms and to take on their desired roles as wives, women and ‘good Muslimas’.

A narrative analysis of infertile women’s stories served as a conscious-raising tool to combat stereotypes and assumptions around infertile people, as it permitted the observation of identities in flux. *Discourses of gender roles and normative femininity that MIFs call upon to construct their wife and mother identities allow for a collaborative construction of a mutually understood definition of infertility and to empower their otherwise stigmatised position. Confirming Jaworska’s (2008) findings, tensions revealed at the macro-level, where personal experiences come in conflict with hegemonic discourses about femininity and motherhood, are negotiated and re-worked through tellings in an exercise of agency. The particularities of bloggers’ situational contexts (the purpose of the telling and the cultural/social interactions involved) and the Discourses they implement to support/exhibit their self-performances aim to enable a depth of personal disclosure. They present infertility stories as unique experiences, refusing to be perceived through one-size-fits-all stereotypical assumptions that compose the general rhetoric around infertile women. IF bloggers navigate between the world-to-person and person-to-world position in all events and stances that they construct, exhibiting the complexity of the identity work they undertake at every turn. In line with Whitehead’s (2013) observations, IF bloggers online do not pursue motherhood simply to conform to gender norms, but because they are socially excluded from a developmental life stage that is crucial to their progression as women, directly affecting their sociality with other women. Therefore, they construct self-enhancing accounts, in which they successfully “draw*

on themes of identity available in social discourse and marshal them as part of constructing their own biography, to tell a particular story of their own” (Smith 1994: 309).

7.4.4 Legitimising the self through religious Discourses.

Religious *Discourses*, such as the discourses of destiny, acceptance of God’s will, and purposefulness were widely used to create empowered positions, particularly in instances where stigmatisation and hegemonic cultural perceptions were evident (similar findings reported by Nouman & Benyamini 2019). This study extends findings by Essers & Benschop (2009); Zaman (2008) & Piela (2012), with regard to how Muslim women take control of social media and use it as a way to present themselves and their complex identities to the world. In stories they tell, MIF bloggers exhibit Islamic values and showcase Islamic knowledge to justify their points in discussions and to construct themselves as ‘good Muslimas’. They display awareness of the prevailing cultural, gendered and religious master narratives that define and limit their desired selves, and work to dissipate notions and stereotypes to legitimise their life choices and empower themselves. This study found that bloggers utilise religious discourses and selectively position themselves on the agency-structure continuum to serve the argument being made at the time of the telling. This agency-related self-location varies, moving along the double arrow of positioning from a complete claim of agency at times, all the way to helplessness and lack of control. Infertility bloggers either selectively exhibited an empowered status (e.g. using the religious discourse of acceptance or serving God), or alternatively expressed submissiveness and victimisation (e.g. asking for God’s help to end their suffering). Interestingly, in all cases bloggers’ subject positioning served to create an

empowering spiritual and emotional connection with their readers. They utilised religious *Discourses* and manipulated their agentive/powerless positions to invoke alignment, elicit sympathy, and/or argue against ‘world’ subject positions. Their construction of self as framed within religious *Discourses* functioned as discursive legitimations (Essers and Benschop 2009), enabling them to stretch the boundaries of the cultural scripts through which they live their lives.

7.4.5 Blogs as facilitators of self-expression.

In relation to claims on how blogs create safe spaces for IF identity enactment, the analysis confirms findings on how self-presentation and self-disclosure of a personal or intimate nature are facilitated by the Internet (Altman & Taylor 1973; Bortree 2005; Bronstein 2012; 2014; Knoll & Bronstein 2014; Misoch 2015; Papacharissi 2004; Trammell et al. 2006; Qian & Scott 2007; Vie’gas 2005). Further, a bidirectional effect between safe spaces and the creation of a homogeneous online community was found. MIF women use blogs to narrate their experiences, position themselves and others in space and time, enact roles and construct or ‘perform’ identities in specific contexts with minimal restrictions, albeit those bound by the nature of the interaction and expectations of the group members. IF bloggers disclose intimate information because their offline identities - who they are in real life - are (at least partly) concealed. This ‘safe zone’ affords self-revelations that are arguably not available elsewhere. Under conditions of anonymity, these women self-disclose more intimate information because there are few if any related risks and constraints (Bargh et al., 2002). As a result, self-disclosure affords opportunities for affinity and promotes authenticity. The TTC community is built on sharing truthful stories, where an authentic self-display facilitates and enhances the interaction between participants

(see discussion on authenticity above, p.30). Hence, the construction of an authentic identity is directly related to issues of sharing and trust which create ‘friendship’ relationships between members of the online community.

Aligned positions/stances with the readers are a vital and prominent self-construction strategy. Presenting the self as ‘being in the same boat as others’ creates a safe space and supportive experience, where one is more likely to be understood and less likely to be judged. Positions of affiliation, mostly achieved via constructing sameness in relation to the lived experiences and through indexing membership to the IF community, are found to be reproduced early on in posts that first document and share IF women’s journeys. In line with Perrino’s findings (2018), sharing and retelling stories of suffering online promotes a ‘sympathy’-based collective identity that is recontextualised as a way to offer/receive support with a group of similars.

Blogging with a sense of community belonging was demonstrated through numerous linguistic and stylistic features. These included conversational style and punctuation, posing open-ended questions, signalling taking turns in the interactional space, informal lexical choices and informal layout displays (e.g. three-dot ellipsis, sequences of short sentences, the use of time adverbials (e.g. ‘right now’) which serve to mimic offline conversations and index a ‘collaborative floor’ Coates 1997). Many of these features functioned as interactive performances that bloggers use to build rapport and construct ‘friendship talk’ in online interactions. These linguistic features were intensively used in instances of self-disclosure. Friendship talk and self-disclosure helped create ‘authentic’ contributions that enabled IF bloggers to construct infertility as a shared experience, and to index fundamental values that helped them achieve a legitimate position within the infertile online community and to build the community itself.

The linguistic analysis of positions revealed how a varied array of linguistic strategies, including negations, conditional phrases, suppositions, modality and punctuation markers such as bracketing, were used to align/disalign the self and perform subjective positions towards social behaviours and/or characters in tellings. The analysis of the linguistic realisations revealed that the use of ‘elastic language’ (Zhang 2015) was a prominent feature. Examples of ‘elastic language’ found in the data includes the heavy use of epistemic stance markers (e.g. I think, I suppose, probably, sort of, kind of) and other subjective expressions. These expressions perform essential pragmatic functions such as mitigation and self-protection that are much needed in the delicate nature of the tellings. Although the above-mentioned linguistic markers have different degrees of assertiveness (e.g. I think vs. I suppose), bloggers’ use of other linguistic indicators such as the “I” makes the position of the narrator more prominent and aids the construction of a more decisive role in their journeys towards conception. At the same time, this study has shown how complex mitigating strategies such as modal verbs of probability in passive constructions were used to silence reference to agency and to avoid blame. The use of fluid or ‘elastic’ linguistic expressions in IF blogs consolidate Zhang’s observations on how the incorporation of elasticity in language and expressions that display a degree of uncertainty works to enrich communication in many ways. Our findings have shown how these linguistic markers support bloggers self-expression, enabling them to mitigate their non-conforming stances, show politeness in their authoritative expressions, gain solidarity and maintain acceptability in the online community.

The abovementioned findings are crucial, particularly in relation to contexts where the self is stigmatised and silenced. Pregnancy and infertility blogs formed unique ‘spaces’ that make the experiences of infertility more visible (as stated by

Harrison 2014:3). Online spaces and social media outlets present women with opportunities to write candidly about their experiences of trying to conceive and their fertility treatments. They enable them to reflect upon their personal and social lives whilst eliminating factors related to the risks involved in revealing their real identities. It also creates opportunities for gaining social support and creating relationships based on mutual concerns.

7.4.6 Affiliation as a tool for self-empowerment.

Findings revealed a detailed understanding of how women navigate their identities via linguistic indices which construct positions of sameness and difference between their characters and others in their story world. The second level of the analysis enabled us to capture how IF bloggers exhibited ‘group membership’ qualities and constructed notions of ‘being in the same boat’, ‘friendship’, and ‘sisterhood’ to create alignment and exhibit familiarity. It also showed how they enacted the self as knowledgeable and moral in comparison to others, mostly in the offline world, though sometimes including online personas when debating particular values that they felt strongly about.

The study found that MIF women navigate their infertility journey by constructing it as uniquely linked to their socio-religious contexts, whilst working simultaneously to make it relatable to ‘others’ in their online social networks. Bloggers negotiation of self/other positions aim at developing mutual definitions of infertility despite their different backgrounds, geographies, beliefs and cultures.

Nevertheless, as per views on relationality in narration (Bamberg et al. 2011; deFina & Georgakopoulou 2008; Wodak 2009), bloggers in this study were shown to project an intrinsic concern about audience expectation and reception. The analysis

has shown how positions of sameness were used to call for aligned stances from other women and to interactively co-construct positions they needed. Bloggers expressed an ongoing awareness of the variability of audiences, (or what was discussed in Chapter Two as ‘context collapse’). Sensitivity to the readership surfaced in the shifting nature of self/other positioning. Bloggers’ identity performance was both shaped and constrained by their awareness of simultaneous potential audiences. They either project this awareness explicitly through directly addressing the audience or discussing their assumed positions on matters, or implicitly through projecting an understanding and considerate self. As suggested by Goffman 1959 (and explicated in social organization theory), social actors work to keep their performances within the limits of mutually understood and expected social norms and employ shared indexicalities that demarcate their community boundaries online (Barton & Lee 2013). However, bloggers in the data did not necessarily exhibit expected performances in cases where they are contesting or critiquing social behaviour. Nevertheless, even in cases of disalignment, MIF bloggers mitigated their adversarial stances linguistically and rhetorically, constantly calling upon similarities of positions and shared backgrounds to build and retain their relationship with their readership. To fulfil this, the nature of the relationship between bloggers and their readers is constantly revised, reconstructed and negotiated. Certainly, audience engagement strategies revealed an added subjective layer in the identity performance of MIF bloggers. The audience’s presence was an inherent characteristic of the way bloggers’ identities are realised and a marker of an underlying awareness of ‘context collapse’.

7.5 Limitations of the Research

Limitations of this study are discussed in relation to subject representation, data interpretation and focus on textual analysis.

Representation

This study has focused on a specific community of Muslim female bloggers who identify as infertile. Despite all measures taken to include representations of bloggers' perspectives within the dataset itself (see Chapter 3) representation remains an issue. For one, sampling proposes an inherent yet unavoidable bias through reduced representation (Androutsopoulos 2008; Bryman et al. 2008; Tuckett 2004). More significantly, the study represents a particular group of educated women who have a good command of English. Despite their various backgrounds, it neglects to represent the voices of MIF bloggers who blog in different languages, or those who do not have access to the Internet or use blogs as a medium. Further, the lack of male perspectives on infertility proposes another bias in terms of representation of voices. However, these limitations do not negate the importance and potential value of the information presented through analysing blogs through a small story framework (see discussions by Hutchinson & Jackson 2014; 2015; Georgalou 2015; Page 2010; 2013). As Hutchinson and Jackson (2015) argue, the significance of analysing small stories is not to provide a horizontal or encompassing picture of a target population, but in their capacity to trouble the dominant discourse and to provide a counter-narrative that demands scrutiny. The framework of looking at positioning in small stories in online communities proved a valuable framework to answer the 'who-am-I' question of identity (see similar conclusions by Georgalou 2015; Jaworska 2018; Mortimer 2018; Walkington et al. 2018).

Interpretation

The detailed narrative analysis that the framework required, which is ideal in an exploratory study, was subject to the intervention of the researchers' own biases and epistemological views. I have striven to minimize the bias of my interpretations by seeking interpretations of the texts from colleagues and friends, and only presenting positions that persistently reoccurred in the data (see p.87 above).

Further, the in-depth detailed analysis and word limitations constrained the ability to present detailed analyses of other case studies. A decision was made to use Mona as the main case study and supplement her accounts with those of other cross-sectional data sets.

Focus

This research would have benefited from looking at the dynamics of interaction with the readers in comments provided by those readers. This would have contributed to the understanding of the infertility-related assumptions and wider discourses circulating in the CofP. However, because not all blogs in our data included such interactions, and given the limited number of available MIF bloggers, it was decided against the inclusion of such instances. For the same reasons, the analysis of semiotic features within the posts, such as the use of images, emoticons and links were excluded. These features were used differently by bloggers, and their inclusion would have resulted in an unbalanced representation of the data. However, a focus on semiotic features – had the focus been on a smaller comparable number of blogs – would have enriched the exploration of self/other positionality and our understanding of identity construction within posts.

7.5 Implications for Future Research

7.5.1 For research in the humanities and social sciences.

The nature of any study of identity in context means that any exploration of identity construction cannot be conclusive. Although this study has achieved its aims, it remains limited both in scope and representation. That being said, further work on the issues covered in this thesis is needed, especially in light of the influence of cultural, social, and psychological dynamics that frame femininity in relation to infertility. Below, a number of future lines of enquiry are envisaged that might take discursive approaches to the study of Muslim and other religious identities, building on some of the insights on positionality in narratives that emerged in this study.

It would be illuminating to look at diachronic self-presentations by investigating posts written by bloggers who conceived and had a child, then went back to the infertility blog as they undertook another battle with infertility in their attempt to conceive again. This scenario was found in three of the cases investigated in this study. It poses interesting questions about how IF identity evolves in different contexts/times. Similarly, this study mainly focussed on successful end-journeys, however, not all journeys were successful. Comparative studies of individuals who experience infertility differently is thus needed to fill this gap.

Further, a significant point of focus that the nature and scope of this research did not look into is the interactivity between different bloggers as found in comments on posts that some bloggers received. These present an interesting dimension on the dynamics of online communication in blogs, including the positions readers take and project on others as they interact with the bloggers' texts.

In addition, as noted above, non-linguistic elements such as images, emojis,

personal drawings and other graphic presentations were used by bloggers as a means of self-expression. These elements beg a combined discursive and semiotic investigation that looks at the construction of gender and femininity in relation to infertility. They present a unique lens into the use of symbolic resources and metaphors as tools for narrativity online (e.g. Koller & Bullo 2019; Levin 2018; Thomson 2018; Yläne 2017).

Another particularly promising future area of investigation is to look at the geopolitics involved in the construction of gender identity in relation to the subjects' various geographical locations, shedding light on the conforming/non-conforming patterns of community behaviour in illness support groups online. There were too few subjects in this study to warrant such a comparison. However, this could prove to be an interesting line of enquiry for future studies. Similarly, an investigation of blogs of infertile women who are members of other religious or ethnic minorities would shed the light on the linguistic and discursive resources IF women use to manage their infertile identities.

Last but not least, other social media outlets such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook etc., offer venues for the sociolinguistic/narrative investigation of infertile women's experiences. Each media outlet has its own specifications and affordances which could present enhanced or limited spaces for the expression of subjectivity. It would be particularly interesting to look at IF bloggers who use multiple social media platforms (e.g. Twitter and Facebook) and investigate similarities/differences in self-management, affiliation strategies and disclosure patterns in particular online settings.

7.5.2 For medical training, education and policy making.

While the analysis discussed in the previous chapters can be considered in academic

discussions of narrative analysis and identity in blogs and other spaces in social media, the breadth and depth they convey has greater effect in enriching our understanding of blogging women themselves. This research affords an opportunity to increase awareness about the unique emotional, medical, social and identity-related challenges these women face, and the choices they make to construct and negotiate their subjectivities and sense of self in between the real and online worlds. This is fundamental to our understanding of why/how women navigate social media and their sense of self. It affords a greater appreciation of the power women exert when engaging in storying their experiences through blogging, using these online spaces to purposefully influence public perception in relation to the *Discourses* surrounding them. These findings can be utilised variously by medical practitioners, teachers and policy makers, as sites of observation and learning.

More specifically, blogs and other social media outlets can be promoted as spaces where women, who have limited outlets, can take part in meaningful engagements with others, despite their specific contextual and cultural restrictions. In this realm, these women could benefit from raising awareness of female tendencies and subjectivities, and from understanding why/how to use language in narration to better apprehend and judge their/others' contributions and language use. They could be helped to appreciate and reflect on their own linguistic behaviours within their groups, framing their discussions in ways that do not treat them as necessarily inferior. This can empower them by bringing awareness to the challenges they face with social prejudices and work to develop vocabulary that would enable them to better project their identities and negotiate their difficult life experiences.

Narratives of infertile women can inform and be used by healthcare professionals to support those undergoing similar experiences, and perhaps those who

do not have access to the internet, or do not wish to participate on social media. Based on the findings of this study, awareness of similar experiences can be beneficial to people experiencing infertility. A focus on empowering discourses in training, teaching and awareness programmes is seen as crucial to aid women maintain positive self-esteem (e.g. see Adnan et al. 2019; Esplen et al. 2020; McGannon et al. 2016; Rains 2018; Zhang et al. 2018 discussion of the empowering effects of illness experience sharing).

The study also carries implications for policy makers in relation to IF women and the medical profession. IF bloggers report on how they perceive health professionals as not ‘listening’ to them, and as disregarding or marginalising their subjective knowledge and experiences. This lack of understanding is often portrayed as accompanied by a lack of empathy, compassion and support, leaving them feeling “*frustrated*”, “*afraid*”, and “*hopeless*” (e.g. Appendix IV; XI; VII). Many bloggers report on how negative medical interactions have caused them to have a difficulty in trusting or ‘fear’ of health professionals. Taking these findings into consideration planning and training medical staff is crucial to enhancing the experiences of patients in gynaecological clinics, and in achieving better results. In addition, by appreciating findings that state how women from different cultural and religious backgrounds are not uniform in their perception of their illnesses, and understanding the discourses that empower or restrict their expression of self, policy makers can promote more inclusive approaches to treatments and rehabilitation. The invisible yet significant impact of infertility presented in this study and its effect on couples’ lives also proposes that health institutions and public funds need to be put in place to aid individuals in need.

Last but not least, this study raises critical questions with regards to how

infertile women and their families appear to be silenced within their local religious and cultural institutions. It informs our understanding of both existing and emergent issues that are essential to improve communication strategies between religious and cultural institutions and their community members who are undergoing infertility treatments. Educational programmes and awareness raising campaigns can address how wider cultural barriers and un-helpful interpretations of religious *Discourses* associated with perception of infertile people and social expectations of procreation increase the potential for resistance of treatment, anxiety and stigmatisation amongst married couples who might require assistance from health, or social/religious services. Further, Muslim communities need to be provided with information about what an infertility experiences might entail, by looking at a varied spectrum of cases, and to be made aware of what support services are available. A consensus about what is/isn't considered acceptable in terms of medical practice needs to be made between religious institutions and health providers/policy makers in this respect. At a more general policy/education strategy-making level, greater efforts are needed to bridge the divide between faith-based perceptions and social expectations, and the realities of infertile Muslim women, aiming at raising awareness to decrease cases of social isolation, mental strains and to avoid delays in women accessing treatment.

7.6 Chapter Summary & Final Conclusion

This chapter presented the main findings in relation to the research questions and to the analyses in the previous chapters. It summarised the dilemmas and troubled subject positions infertile Muslim women negotiate at three major stages of their journeys towards conception, looking at the performative work carried out in the

narratives they tell in blogs and how their identities are constructed over time. The chapter also discussed the contributions this thesis made in relation to the literature. Its limitations were discussed, and it ended by considering possible applications/implications in the fields of communication, social sciences and for medical/political policy making.

Finally, the motivation and driving force behind this study had been to ‘hear’ and bring to the fore the voices of Muslim women who have or are experiencing infertility and who have limited opportunities to discuss this openly. Perhaps, readers of this work have felt the importance of this aim as they shared in the emotional distress of reading and unpacking these women’s harrowing, yet eloquently presented accounts. No doubt, the in-depth micro examination of these narratives using positioning theory and small story analysis offered rewarding insights into perspectives that have long been silenced in the lived experiences of individuals, and overlooked by research. The impetus for this study was based on a strong belief in the power of stories to bring people into being and for others to see inside their world. The focus on blogs opened up an opportunity to take a peek inside a hitherto hidden world. It is hoped that this thesis will encourage researchers to look more closely at minority religious communities of women, and to consider alternative methods that contribute to deeper insights on the experiences of other subaltern groups facing identity dilemmas.

Appendices

Appendix I

Mona

(To face denial, Mona, Infertile Muslim. Posted 9-Nov-2011)

1 *DW's confessions:*

2 *I'm going to be honest now... This BFN made me realize how much denial I'm in*
3 *regarding our infertility.*

4 *When I went off the pill, the "know it all" folks said it takes some time for your body*
5 *to regulate... I didn't believe that.*

6 *Even after the first year, when my OB/GYN said we should try for another 6 months, I*
7 *had an inkling that something was wrong... but insisted to believe that everything*
8 *happens in due time.*

9 *It seemed like everyone was falling pregnant around me... but I refused to obsess. I*
10 *didn't want to chart my BBT or use ovulation predictors.*

11 *We went for the basic fertility screening and though my husband's semen analysis*
12 *showed azoospermia... there was nothing wrong with me so it's not that bad.*

13 *After seeing out fertility specialist and starting our first IVF process... my logic was*
14 *that if there were embryos, they would just stick.*

15 *Then the BFN came!*

16 *This is when I realized that dealing with infertility is something bigger than I ever*
17 *thought it was. What a test in humility!*

18 *I'm having many difficult days dealing with the devastation after our failed IVF...*

19 *then I also have to be strong enough to console my husband when he constantly*

20 *apologizes because he believes it's his fault.*

- 21 *I know that Allah doesn't test us with more than we can handle, but right now I feel*
- 22 *defeated and just wish that this painful emptiness would simply disappear.*

Appendix II

Suki

(Is sisterhood a myth?, Suki, A Baba InshaAllah. Posted 19-Feb-2014)

1 *I've been contemplating this topic for a while from different perspectives. As a*
2 *woman, a Muslim and hijabi (someone who follows a modest way of life in dress and*
3 *demeanor), a professional, wife, graduate, daughter, public servant, and so on, I*
4 *occupy many roles in society.*
5 *Many of our roles or identities as women are made all the more challenging because*
6 *of criticism by other women who one would expect to be empathetic at the very least.*
7 *I've seen this [in faith](#)⁴⁰ and have in fact been on the receiving end of criticism...*
8 *"Your colours are too bright", "Muslim women shouldn't wear makeup", "What's*
9 *the point in covering your head if you're wearing trousers" and other inanities*
10 *detract from the fact that this life of modesty and how to express it is my own personal*
11 *choice based on my relationship with God, nobody else.*
12 *In our world of IF, there's a similar kind of [unfair critique](#)⁴¹ that Jay over at [The 2](#)*
13 *[Week Wait](#)⁴² faced. I had seen this phenomenon elsewhere online and still find it so*
14 *confusing. I understand the sadness, but not the bitterness. Why would one direct*
15 *one's anger at someone who's been through the same pain as you? Of course it's*
16 *misdirected – the frustration is obvious, we all know it, but I guess we all react in*
17 *different ways. I wish it wasn't in this manner though.*

⁴⁰ hyperlink: www.aquila-style.com/focus-points/the-rise-of-the-haram-police/

⁴¹ Hyperlink: <http://the2weekwait.blogspot.com/2011/08/pregnant-infertile.html>

⁴² Hyperlink: <http://the2weekwait.blogspot.com/>

- 18 *And nevermind all that, once you've managed to survive the bitter IF backlash and*
19 *had your baby, there's [birth shaming](#)⁴³*

⁴³ Hyperlink: <http://www.parent24.com/Baby/birth/My-birth-shaming-experience-20140123>

Appendix III

Leila

(What Not to Say to Infertiles: “It’s God’s Will”. Leila, Beyond What ifs. Posted 23-Apr-2014)

1 In most South Asian cultures, there are common refrains thrown at those facing
2 negative life events. In Urdu and among Muslims, there are a few with essentially the
3 same idea as in English:

4 *Urdu English*

5 *Khuda ki marzi: It’s God’s will / It’s God’s whim*

6 *Khuda ki dain: God gives as he chooses*

7 *khuda behtar karta hai: God does things for the best*

8 *Iss mey bhi kahi behtri hogi: Things happen for the best /*

9 *There must be good in this*

10 Regardless of language, faith, or culture—and regardless of one’s intention—these are
11 awful words repeated mindlessly, without thought to what it truly means. And these
12 aren’t old aunties speaking, who live in villages in some remote part of the world.

13 These are people, mostly women, many of my generation, both who grew up here in
14 the US and those who are in Pakistan. They are friends, family members,
15 acquaintances, and very often, strangers.

16 In the past, I didn’t know how to respond. And as I mention in many posts, I have had
17 to resist punching someone in the face. Now I feel able to say, and wish I was able to
18 do so in the past, that when someone says any of the above, this is what’s actually
19 being said:

20 *If you miscarry and are struggling to have children, it is for the best. God thinks it*

21 makes sense to have you long for a child as well as have you face heartbreak over
22 repeated loss of one. The day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year existence that is
23 infertility serves a greater purpose, and therefore, is justified. God has determined it to
24 be for the best and chosen the loss specifically of your child. Our benevolent God,
25 who chooses to give and take a child, has chosen for *you* to not have one. As it is the
26 way of an all-knowing higher being, people everywhere are having children by the
27 dozen, but due to the whims of our God, you are special and have been selected to
28 spend an extended period groveling as you kneel on shards of glass that rest on
29 burning coals. God or fate vacillates, and it's helpful to understand that while the
30 sway to is to provide others with a child and not you.

31 So you can see why it's hard for me to not to punch you in the face. If a God exists, I
32 will never accept that certain people have been chosen to have children, anymore than
33 Infertiles are chosen to be deprived of them. If you insist that this is God, then I reject
34 your God, instead, turning to mine—a source I opt to rely on in order to weather
35 hardships which all of us must confront in one way or another.

36 So instead of mindlessly repeating words to demonstrate your faith and wisdom, I'm
37 pretty sure our greater responsibility is to examine spoken words carefully. If the true
38 intent is to invoke God—fate or any higher purpose/being—with the purpose of
39 providing others comfort, then perhaps the focus should be on providing greater
40 capacity to you for compassion.

41

Appendix IV

Mona

(Still I carry on, Mona, Infertile Muslim, Jan 16 2012)

1 *I've been quiet.*

2 *The last few months have been very tough for me.*

3 *I turned 30 and my proverbial biological clock seems to be ticking ever louder. I can*
4 *feel my uterus twinge... I literally ache in broodiness.*

5 *I'm plagued with so many emotions... anger, frustration, hopelessness, fear... the list*
6 *carries on. But I feel like I need to relinquish all of it because I'm meant to comfort*
7 *my husband and ease his pain of bearing the burden of carrying the cause of our*
8 *infertility.*

9 *I respect him wanting to keep our infertility a secret, but it seems this secrecy leaves*
10 *me feeling isolated... from the world and sometimes even him.*

11 *Still I carry on... I brush my teeth, I swim in the sea, I do the laundry, I clean the*
12 *dishes, I go to work... I try to be normal.*

13 *But how normal can I be when the comfort of my mother and to be able to share with*
14 *a friend that we've gone through one failed IVF seems taboo*

15 *Though I know I am not... this is why I feel alone.*

16 *Everyday I pray that the Almighty makes this weight easier for me to carry... but*
17 *today is a difficult day.*

18 *I have that choke in my throat and I feel ready to crumble.*

19 *Still I carry on...*

Appendix V

Suki

(Male factor test #2, Suki, A baba InshaAllah, 30 Jan 2014)

1 *I wrote about the process of getting the SA completed at Pathcare. I want to share the*
2 *conversation (or LACK thereof) that took place the night I collected the sample*
3 *container and form for the SA.*
4 *The Hub actually seems unhappy about going ahead with this. He's been cautious up*
5 *to now, as I've told you before.*



6
7 *[image: Source: <http://thepitterpatter.blogspot.com/2010/04/to-fb-or-not-tofb.html>]*
8 *I feel lost. And sad. I maintain that we need to know what's wrong so in the very least*
9 *I can start seeing whether I respond to ovulation stimulants since I don't ovulate on*
10 *my own.*
11 *This lack of support is getting me down, you guys. It feels like I'm doing this alone.*
12 *Perhaps I am.*
13 *What would you do in this position?*

Appendix VII

Salam

(A long painful absense, Salam, Heart of a Muslimah [sub title: A nomadic heart on a journey of discovery!], 28 July 2011)

1 *I am the mother of the most amazing, beautiful funny, curious and very challenging*
2 *little girl. I love the time I have with her and fear that I will never be enough of a*
3 *mother for her. She has soo much potential yet how do I draw that out? But that's not*
4 *today's story! Today's story is about how I imagined this gift from Allah SWT running*
5 *around, building duvet tents, having water fights, swapping penny sweets and*
6 *hoarding precious toys away from her brothers and sisters.*
7 *Alas, it seems that this dream is not my destiny. Try as I might I, or should I say*
8 *biology, keeps failing. This year I went through my 4th failed pregnancy and this was*
9 *the most bittersweet of all! As a child I had dreamed of being a mother to twins, when*
10 *I met my husband he also loved the idea of being parents to 2 superb miracles of*
11 *Allah SWT. So every now and again we would make dua that if it was right for us,*
12 *could Allah SWT bless us with this most amazing gift! And at the end of last year it*
13 *seemed our dream was coming true. I was pregnant, we had managed to get past the*
14 *critical 12 week period and I was carrying 2 blessed little hearts.*
15 *Qadr of Allah was that my beloved babies left this world when they reached 20 weeks*
16 *of age. 20 weeks! When I look at my daughter, 20 weeks is a drop in the ocean yet the*
17 *bond I have with my son and daughter is just as strong. I feel them, my arms ache to*
18 *hold them, my lap yearns to feel them lying before me, my eyes see them with every*
19 *blink and my fingertips so gently caress their soft delicate skin. Ya Rabb, I wish i had*
20 *held and cuddled them more than I did when they were born. I am so sorry my*

21 *darlings that I did not love you enough while you were with me.[...]*

22 *This therapy is harder than I thought! OK let's go back to the facts! That's easier to*

23 *cope with. Ok so here's my infertility bio.*

24 *I'm 37 years old, my first pregnancy was spontaneous and totally amazingly*

25 *successful. After this I fell pregnant after 3 years to miscarry before 8 weeks. A year*

26 *and a half later, same thing. Doctors gave me the 'unexplained infertility' label and*

27 *off I went to decide what next?!*

28 *Next came the fertility doc, a matter of fact, hurried, no time for bedside manners kind*

29 *of guy who told me I don't actually have PCOS, it's actually insulin resistance which*

30 *in turn leads to infertility. Interesting huh! So I started metformin, changed diet,*

31 *increased cardio activities and attempted IUI. Guess what! I fell pregnant! Yaay! Not*

32 *really, the high lasted 24 hours after which I discovered it was an ectopic, that*

33 *ruptured and I had emergency surgery and thankfully lost only the tube, not the ovary.*

34 *Oh well, that was bad luck, never mind. So after taking time out to recover, we*

35 *decided lets not risk the other tube and lets go straight to IVF. All was great, 11 eggs*

36 *were harvested, 10 were potential and 5 were grade As! So we decided to implant 3*

37 *and see how things go.*

38 *Morning sickness came quick and was followed by the fabulous confirmation that I*

39 *had 2 healthy looking embryos growing inside me. Every scan was great, their growth*

40 *was great, the nuchal test was great. Great, great, great! Then I reached 19 weeks,*

41 *and something was just not right. Next thing, amniotic fluid everywhere (sorry for the*

42 *graphics!) And off to hospital we went!*

43 *One of the sacs had ruptured, they wanted to induce both, but then at the last-minute*

44 *said maybe there was a chance to save one of the babies so lets just wait and see. Late*

45 *that night, I delivered a perfect, dainty, button-nosed little princess named Maryam.*

46 *Her heart beat was loud and strong but with no lungs the minute she left my body her*
47 *life was no more. Ok , well its Qadr of Allah, and I wanted her but inna lillahi wa*
48 *inna ilayhi raji'oun right? To Allah we belong and to Allah is our return.*
49 *So I kissed her and let her go, she was with Allah now. I focused my attention on the*
50 *little baby inside, still strong, still with mama who was already completely in love*
51 *with her precious babies!*
52 *(Is this a good time to tell you I'm not one of those soft, sappy mums? I really am the*
53 *dry-wit, stiff upper lip, life's hard get on with it. But my rational being seems to have*
54 *deserted me. :()*
55 *I prayed all night, my husband prayed all night but in the morning, despite and*
56 *incredibly strong heartbeat, the second sac ruptured. Say goodbye mummy, I have to*
57 *leave now. And just after mid-day there went my prince, my son Mohammed, so*
58 *strong and proud, firm, yet sensitive and oh so charming, just like his Dad! I could*
59 *see the man he could have been, the boy I would have learned the off-side rule for, the*
60 *baby who took my breath away! He was leaving me to join Ya Khaliq and his*
61 *sister! Who was I to resist that? What could I offer that could anyway compare the*
62 *beauty of jannah and the company of the righteous.*
63 *My husband's eyes lost their light and it felt like his anger had scorched any love he*
64 *might have left for me. So being the heart of the home, off I went, trying to accept and*
65 *be of the sabireen (patient ones) and accept the beautiful gift of 2 children already in*
66 *Jannah! Could a mother ask for anything more for her children?*
67 *Now I needed to be a consoling and supporting wife and strong and loving mother to*
68 *my little princess at home. And I tried, oh I tried, but I couldn't reach my husband. He*
69 *was so far away and all the visitors that descended upon us, loved as they all are, just*
70 *gave him opportunity to run the other way. He's slowly walking back and hopefully*

71 *we'll meet on the same path someday soon!*

72 *My daughter is a healer beyond all measure and again her little soul was a source of*

73 *comfort and inspiration to me. What a precious gift you already blessed me with Ya*

74 *Rabb!*

75 *Yet, that box, you know the one made of the gorgeous, rustic reclaimed wood? I filled*

76 *it with all the pain and heartache and trusted that time will heal all. Plus you have to*

77 *accept the will of your Lord, and I do! I really do, I just can't keep the lid shut, it flies*

78 *open and sends me reeling! I just can't get it to stay shut. What do I do now?*

79 *Someone please tell me.....*

Appendix VIII

Nora

*(Dear God. Please stop strangling my soul. Love, Fertility Doll, Nora, Fertility Doll,
8 Feb 2013)*

1 *At the beginning of this week I was caught in a storm. I felt so forgotten by God, so*
2 *mad at my friend for leaving it until five months to tell me of her pregnancy and just*
3 *generally angry at myself for being in this pathetic state of limbo. I don't think my*
4 *friend trying to save my feelings, I'm pretty sure it's a case of not wanting evil*
5 *eye.. yes.. my evil eye.. pffff!*
6 *I spent Monday sobbing because my soul felt like God was strangling it. I'm a tad*
7 *dramatic, I know. But that's how it felt, plus it didn't help that I was flued up.. or*
8 *maybe it did because then I took some meds and slept lots.*
9 *This is not how I want to go into my thirties. I want and need some happiness in my*
10 *life. My twenties have been one big struggle – one where infertility has dominated.*
11 *It got me thinking, what do I want from life if a baby isn't written for me?*
12 *What do I want for myself?*
13 *That's one of the hardest questions to answer but it's where I need to start. I'll be*
14 *damned if I'm crying into my thirties*

Appendix IX

Nora

(*Seeking God*, Nora, Fertility Doll, 16 Aug 2012)

1 *Each time I try to write a new blog post, the words just won't come. It is said to be*
2 *Laylat al-Qadr tonight – the night of destiny. It's believed that on this holy night God*
3 *writes what is in store for each of us. Muslims make extra prayers and ask for what*
4 *they desire in hope that it will be granted. Yet, I can't bring myself to ask for a child*
5 *because if God is closer to me than my pulmonary artery then surely He feels this*
6 *pain as His own? Surely the pain, the tears and perseverance over the last five years*
7 *have been my silent prayer.*

8 *On the one hand I need to have faith that everything happens for a reason, that*
9 *there's something to learn from this pain. I need to accept that there's a chance that*
10 *perhaps children aren't in my destiny right now... or ever. As my father says, "events*
11 *take place in God's time, not in your time." On the other hand I need to pray, ask and*
12 *fight for what I want. It is proving difficult to do both. Hope takes a beating each*
13 *month and my soul struggles to hold onto God.*

14 *It is easier to not dwell on the past, to not think about the future and what might be*
15 *written. To just focus on the present. So on that note I'm off to bed, leaving destiny*
16 *and all my worries with God.*

Appendix X

Dalal

Excerpt 1: (Really? Really?!, Dalal, Pcos Or Pcod? Does It Even Make A Difference, May 16 2013)

1 Today, I was furious...and for me, I think it was for a very good reason. I come from
2 a small family, a few aunts or uncles on each side of my family. My husband's family
3 on the other side, consists of at least 13 aunts or uncles on each side, and as much as
4 that is so wonderful and amazing, they are all tight knit, and once anyone finds out
5 anything, the rest do too. I admire their relationships, and sometimes envy them for
6 that. My parents side of the family aren't that close, and have had a lot of problems
7 over the years. When we spoke to my husbands parents and told them about the
8 pregnancy early on, they had been on this journey with us and we couldn't wait to let
9 them know. My parents, have kept the news hush from anyone and everyone. Only
10 one grandma and cousin know, the rest don't even know we are going through IVF.
11 My husbands mother is religious, and doesn't like lying ect...and as much as I respect
12 that, the unfortunate news of our pregnancy has been spilled. Aunts on both ends
13 cornered her to find out why I have been missing for so long (as they suspected
14 pregnancy) and she tried really hard to beat around the bush but apparently it got to a
15 point where she had to lie, and she couldn't. So she told them. I had a complete
16 hysteric breakdown today yelling and screaming at my husband (which I know didn't
17 have anything to do with it, but who else was I going to yell at?) at how this moment
18 has been stolen away from me. This is NOT how it was suppose to happen! I did NOT
19 want to share the news with his fertile family members! After being pricked and

20 prodded, anesthetized and having puncture wounds, I deserve the right to have this
21 terrifying news kept between immediate family until we know everything is ok. I
22 can't overcome the angry and anxiety I have inside of me because of what has
23 happened. And while I know this all seems horrendous to most of you, unfortunately
24 in Arab culture this is all normal and typical. People don't know boundaries, and
25 quite frankly don't care for them either. We haven't even had our 6 1/2 week ultrasound
26 to make sure our baby is VIABLE to go around announcing this pregnancy! I am
27 horrified, and while I know it wasn't done on purpose or maliciously, I just can't help
28 but be so angry inside of me. Don't we just LOVE being a part of an Arab family

Appendix XI

Nora

(IVF 2: What happened after I fell silent..., Nora, Fertility Doll, Jan 10 2015)

1 This is going to be a triggering post which mentions that hated and yet rejoiced word
2 beginning with P. If you're unable to cope with reading about that right now then
3 please do protect yourself and skip this post. I'm writing about this because in a way
4 my blog needs closure and I also need writing as therapy.

5 The last time I wrote about IVF 2 I was going through beta hell and I was suffering
6 from severe cramps. I was pretty much at my lowest. Dr Oracle moved my scan
7 forward and the outcome was that we saw a small gestational sac (measuring behind)
8 but the most beautiful angelic looking yolk. I was told not to get my hopes up, the sac
9 might have been in the right place but it wasn't the correct size. Yet, all I could do
10 was fixate my memory on the halo that was now sitting in my womb. At that point
11 every part of me traveled inwards, an invisible shield shot up around me and all I
12 could do was pray to stop me from falling apart. I decided to stop writing and talking
13 about it due to a number of reasons:

- 14 1. Going quiet is my way of dealing with stress and anxiety. If I don't focus on it and
15 avoid talking about it constantly then I can use the energy to focus on other areas of
16 my life and it stops me from falling into depression.
- 17 2. My closest friends here were suffering awful cycles and outcomes. As my
18 pregnancy showed signs of progression, I didn't want to bombard their WordPress
19 and Twitter feeds with pregnancy talk. It also never seemed the right time to say 'Hey
20 guess what? I'm pregnant but nervous as hell.' After thinking about it, I decided that

21 until I felt confident in the pregnancy there was little point mentioning it. It's funny
22 how the milestone of viability kept moving – 8-9wks, 12wks, 20wks, 24wks, 28wks..
23 it was only around 24wks that I finally told my real life circle and even then I still felt
24 as if the rug might be pulled from under me at any time. I just didn't want to count my
25 chicken before he hatched (the same way I didn't want to get excited about egg
26 numbers during IVF).
27 I said to my IF buddy BB that it was my turn to be strong for her and other friends. I
28 may have been going crazy from anxiety but it was still a positive and progressing
29 pregnancy. I think Turtle summed it up nicely when she wrote:



31 I wrote this back in May:
32 *You see... I remember the rawness of the pain, the feeling of doors closing and being*
33 *left behind.*
34 *I remember how it's so easy to fall into the wrong side of the statistic and so hard to*
35 *be on the right side.*
36 *I remember how tough it is to get yourself out of bed after a failed IVF cycle.*
37 *I remember how my bruises were reminders of a battle I lost.*
38 *I remember worrying about how to finance another round and watching the pressure*
39 *it puts on a marriage.*
40 *I remember putting on a mask to survive and wondering how you can feel so dead*

41 *when you're so alive.*

42 *I remember how much effort it takes to get yourself back on track.*

43 *I remember the pain in my partner's eyes.*

44 *I remember how each baby post I read made me feel helpless. How each bump picture*

45 *seemed liked an unachievable dream.*

46 *I remember and that's why I didn't write. The timing wasn't right to be writing about*

47 *a pregnancy – even if the journey is far from perfect. I don't know whether this*

48 *pregnancy is here to stay but I do know that this blog isn't for me to write about*

49 *pregnancy or raising a child.*

50 So those of you I went quiet on... forgive me. I did it because you were suffering at

51 the time and it just didn't feel right announcing it while you were in pain. The great

52 thing is that so many of you have now moved on with successful pregnancies.

53 3. Women who were cycling at the same time as me with promising betas started to

54 experience losses. I was conscious of their pain and the possibility that I was going to

55 join them very soon.

56 These are some snippets I wrote during Spring 2014:

57 *I'm really scared that this baby will stop growing. I can't even bring myself to write*

58 *because I don't feel secure. I tell myself that I won't get attached but I already am so*

59 *in awe of what I saw. Even if it's just flesh and bone.*

60 *I just wonder whether I'm going to be writing about birth or miscarriage.*

61 *I decided I'd write when I feel secure on whatever the reality and outcome. Since the*

62 *last post, my anxiety has been through the roof and I'm not even sure how I'm still*

63 *functioning and moving.*

64 But my low betas of 37, 111, 297 have led to the birth of my son on 8 January. He

65 arrived two weeks early and was delivered via a category 1 c-section. He's still in

66 hospital as he's tiny and needs some help with feeding. That's another story that I
67 won't be sharing on this blog. If/when I get time to I might open a new blog but first
68 I'd like to update this blog with posts about hypnotherapy, nutrition and all the small
69 things that helped me survive 2014's IVF cycle.
70 Fertility Doll will stay focused on infertility – that I can promise to those stuck in the
71 trenches. I invested a ridiculous amount in alternative therapies so I when I'm healed
72 and in a routine I want to pass on that knowledge.
73 All I can say is a huge thank you to all of you who supported me and interacted with
74 this blog over the last couple of years. You've been my sanctuary.
75

Appendix XII

Liela

(About Me: An Update. Leila, Beyond What ifs. Posted 14-Apr-2014)

1 Over a year ago, I became a mother.
2 Simply, beautifully, unimaginably, suddenly, and simultaneously, my husband and I
3 had the greatest good fortune and privilege of becoming parents to 3 beautiful
4 children, through adoption and surrogacy.
5 Now a year and half later, it's hard to believe 7 years of infertility actually happened
6 and we managed to survive, individually and together, as so much of it no longer feels
7 real. Those who know us intimately and have been by our side, as well as those who
8 have experienced infertility first hand, know how hard Infertiles have to work to have
9 children. I don't have to explain that actual work went into having our ordinary family
10 with our ordinary lives through extraordinary circumstances. We feel tremendous
11 gratitude for where we are and for all that is finally behind us, knowing there are far
12 greater hardships people face and overcome. As with any story, one hopes to always
13 recognize lessons learned and appreciate all that was needed to attain our goal, such
14 as inner strength, marital resilience, kindness of people, and randomness of events.
15 What I know to be true and want to always remember is how our current simple life
16 with its senseless preceding story was only possible because we recognized that we
17 were stuck.
18 We were in our 7th year with a long series of odd, bizarre, heartbreaking events
19 behind us, no closer to having children than when we started. We knew it was time to
20 consider a close to this chapter in our lives, even if it meant a life without children.
21 There comes a point where you have to prepare yourselves to let go. In our case, we

22 still needed to give adoption and surrogacy our all before considering the alternative
23 life of one without children in our home—we could see the end but still had one final
24 stretch [...]

25 With a resolution that things needed to change and address what wasn't working, we
26 felt renewed and lighter. We determined our last few steps and would go on to do
27 what we had been afraid of, what so many had discouraged us from, but we knew to
28 be right for us—adoption and surrogacy.

29 We ignored all the external and internal pressures that made us question adoption and
30 surrogacy. It was time to part ways with caution and planning. It was time to trust
31 what we knew of ourselves and what was right for us. For the sake of ensuring sanity,
32 avoiding life-long regrets, and working toward a conclusion to this particular story,
33 there was no more room to second guess the final few moves available to us.

34 We went all in, in this final move, applying for adoption and surrogacy at the same
35 time, without feeling the need to choose. We didn't want to do one and then move on
36 to the other, only to lose more time. [...] Once the adoption process and surrogacy
37 were underway, I made a couple of page and post entries, but my heart and mind was
38 too overwhelmed, and I just wanted to experience and just be with the new found
39 joys. I finally picked up the blog a couple of months ago, when it felt right, when
40 some of the shock had worn off of our new world with three children. There's no
41 desire to turn this into a parenting blog as many infertility blogs will turn into once
42 their experience has reached some end. There are plenty of those and amazing ones at
43 that. I find myself with the wish to pick up where I left off as well as explore the
44 larger landscape of reproductive medicine, policies, trends, culture.

45 As part of our journey, with treatments, surrogacy, adoption, there's so much we've
46 learned [...]. We also have so much context related to culture and faith, and struggled

47 with the lack of dialogue in these areas with regards to infertility. At the very least,
48 the next time people Google any aspect of our own searches, there may be just a little
49 more information for them.

50 Another reason to continue with this endeavor is my belief that Infertiles remain part
51 of the dialogue on fertility and infertility, even after concluding their journey, with or
52 without a child. Our voices, perspectives, and advocacy are needed to challenge the
53 limitations that currently exist in culture, medicine, policy, and interpretations of
54 faith.

55 The Infertile perspective is even more critical now. With all the developments and
56 movement to curtail women's reproductive abilities through legislation, the changing
57 landscape is going to gravely affect those coping with infertility through limited
58 reproductive options, greater stigma, negative portrayals, legal consequences, and
59 decreased cultural and faith-based support.

60 [...] there is a need for changing attitudes and beliefs around adoption among
61 Pakistanis and Muslims generally everywhere. With the Islamic mandate to care for
62 orphans, the community and cultures leave much to be desired around those without
63 one or both biological parents.

64 The faith issue is particularly new and interesting to me. I thought I would be writing
65 from a perspective of growing up Muslim and being a Muslim; but it seems that there
66 is much to be said even as a woman of any faith, living in a country, founded on the
67 principles of separating church and state, veering dangerously into laws dictated by
68 faith. It seems now the perspective is simply of a woman who is gripped with fear to
69 see the country she loves taken over by religion, any religion, rendering large
70 segments of our population powerless over their own bodies and lives. Islam or
71 Christianity. There are enough countries to show how ruling with a religious fist is

72 futile and arbitrary. There's enough history to show the damage of one interpretation
73 of any one faith, when enforced on entire countries and hemispheres. There is enough
74 reason to be one more questioning voice, asking to be left alone with her body and her
75 relationship with God.

1

Appendix XIII

Arche

(On being a woman without children, Arche 2020, Arche's Perspective, Nov 12, 2014)

1 As I sit down to write my thoughts and reflections, I pause to think, where should this
2 story begin and how should it be told. It is an accumulation of 9 years of emotions and
3 confusion, actions and experiences, reflection and clarity, and acceptance with
4 perspective. It's a simple story of this chapter of my life as a married woman
5 expecting that the next chapter would be as a mother with children. I waited month
6 after month and year after year for this chapter to arrive. In essence, my story affirms
7 the idea that we may plan, but God is the best of planners. It is a story that is still
8 being lived out and only God knows what the future holds.

9 Over the years, I saw how the intensity of my duas faded. And it's something I reflect
10 upon often, as to why I wasn't reaching out to God with all of my heart. I don't know,
11 it was almost an acceptance of my state and maybe even a defense mechanism, albeit
12 maybe not the best approach to take. But let it be known, I never stopped believing in
13 God nor did I have a crisis of faith. But there were surely many emotional moments of
14 sadness and confusion.

15 When I used to read Qur'anic passages, hadiths, or listen to lectures and sermons on
16 the high station of mothers, such as "paradise is beneath the feet of mothers," it used
17 to make me feel sad since I knew that I would not be able to fulfill this role. It often
18 left me confused, asking the question, "Why me?" But, at the same time, I tried not to
19 forget that just because I wasn't able to fully live through those teachings on being a
20 mother, I could still appreciate its beauty and importance when I saw my own mom or
21 my girl-friends with kids.

22 Upon further reflection, I've also thought about the wives of the Prophet Muhammad
23 (S), of which only one (Lady Khadija (ra)) bore children who lived past the age of 2.
24 Otherwise, the wives were all childless. It was very comforting to know that my
25 situation was not a unique one, that this was an experience lived by most of the
26 Prophet's wives as well. What I also found highly inspiring was knowing that these
27 wives of the Prophet (s) were given a high station as indicated by their title in the
28 Qur'an: Mother of the Believers. Although they may not have bore children, their
29 impact was meaningful and special. They lived lives of virtue and contributed to their
30 communities through social services and scholarship.

31 What also gave me perspective on my situation was understanding that what we are
32 given and what we are deprived of are both tests from God. It gave me the perspective
33 that I don't know God's greater plan. And that truly it is God who is in control. And
34 through it all, to remind myself of the blessings that were present in my life and to be
35 grateful for God's many gifts.

36

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