Posing my Identity. Today's Outfit, Identity and Gender in Swedish Blogs

Ann-Charlotte Palmgren, Åbo Akademi University – Women's Studies

Abstract

In a Swedish context blogs have become increasingly common and young women and men frequently post their self-portraits taken with digital cameras online. The photos are often categorized as "Today's Outfit", where the bloggers pose in the cloths that they are wearing that day. In this article I study how the body, identities and gender are staged in pictures of today's outfit. I look at differences and similarities, the use of the male gaze and performativity. The main focus in the article is on examples from blogs. I conclude that there are differences between photographs taken by males and females. For example I could find examples where females pose in a sexually provocative posture on the ground but not a man. The blogger have the power to express themselves with digital technology in a new media, but in some limitations.

Keywords: Blog, Identity, Self-portrait, Fashion, Gender

Introduction

In this article the theoretical focus is foremost on identity, self-portraits and blogs. How is the identity and gender staged in photographs of today's outfit? Are there differences and similarities in the posing? Is the posing performative? How are gender and the body staged? Is the male gaze used by the bloggers?

I will begin with a theoretical background to identity and identity connected to the body and gender. Therefore I will briefly also discuss theories about performativity, subject and object and the male gaze. This is followed by a short introduction to blogs consisting of these kinds of photographs and methodological concerns. The main focus in the article is on examples from blogs and the examination of how identity is constructed through the photographs. I will end with some concluding reflections on the specific questions stated earlier.

Self-portraits: identity, the body and gender

This article is written from a constructivist perspective, which means that I see identity as socially and culturally constructed. This means that identity can be seen as a series of repetitions of identical acts. I argue that the bloggers stage identities instead of a singular identity. We have an inner subjective identity – a unique feeling of being me. Besides that we have an exterior objective identity – our physical measurable characteristics and furthermore a layer in between – our intersubjective or shared identities. Shared identities are about our sociocultural positions, videlicet about how we are characterized by others

and/or with the images we identify ourselves with. (Fornäs 1991, 21) This is something very clear when one studies young people. They can show a strong inner motivation to change themselves. (Göthlund 1997, 58) There are different spheres were the different identities are constructed and sometimes melted together. The blog is part of the blogger's everyday life and the blog can be seen as one sphere were they can try out different strategies and identities. In the blog the above mentioned identities can melt together into a today's outfit picture.

A photograph labeled "today's outfit" can be categorized as a self-portrait. According to Avgitidou (2003) self-portraits is in the context of autobiography, a self-exploration as much as it is a self-representation. Self-portraits become the visual equivalent to autobiographical text and can be seen as medium for the exploration of an identity socially and culturally constructed. Stern (2008, 98) has shown that online publications can provide important opportunities for managing the complex situations and shifting self-expectations that characterize adolescence. In descriptions of their decisions about what to reveal, exaggerate and omit in their online communication, youth authors reveal a highly conscious process of self-inquiry. In boyd's (2008, 128) study about profiles that teens create in social network sites the process of writing oneself into being online forces teens to work through identity in new ways. Teens must work out how they in vision themselves and how they want to be seen and then they must use tools to formally articulate this, often without the feedback mechanisms and context that make impression management seamless. According to Liu (2007) the mediated self-representations that they create reveal both what they share in common and how they distinguish themselves from those around them. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) have stated that we see ourselves today in and through our available media. This is not to say that our identity is not fully determined by media, but rather that we employ media as a vehicle for defining both personal and cultural identity. As these media become simultaneously technical analogs and social expressions of our identity, we become simultaneously both the subject and the objects of contemporary media.

Lasén and Gómez-Cruz (2009) state that one of the changes regarding everyday photographical practises concerns the practice, uses, and meanings of the self-portrait, which was traditionally reserved for artistic photography. Nowaday, they are narrowly linked to the growing use of pictures as a way of self-presentation in the Web. Therefore, self-portraits seem to be taking part in embodiment processes and in the shaping and knowing of the self, regarding the perception, conception, and relation to our own body. The body is connected to identity. In the pictures of today's outfit the body and clothes are prominent. Since the body is always more or less visible and instantly available, the body is very important in visual communication. Our body can be seen as a surface of projection of our identity and connected to identity and the body also gender can be seen. People constantly make performances that display characteristics

that are thought of as masculine or feminine, and in doing so, they construct themselves to fit into one of the categories men or women (Sveningsson Elm 2007, 106).

Performativity, objectification, subjectification and the male gaze

The theoretical framework in this article is that identity, the body and gender are foremost socially and culturally constructed through self-portraits, which has been argued for in so far in this article. The theoretical apparatus in the analyses comes from this framework, but can be narrowed down more specifically to theories about performativity, the male gaze and objectification and subjectification.

The staging and posing can be seen as performative. Judith Butler (1990, 136) write that acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.

In Walker's (2005) discussion about the duality of subject and object in self-portraits she refers to Laura Mulvey (1975) who has argued that the cinematic gaze tends to objectify the women it portrays. This cinematic gaze is also called the male gaze. As Mulvey (1975) discussed the male gaze, so have several others. John Berger (1972, 47) noted that men 'act' and women 'appear.' Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. It is common in commercial advertisement for the man to not look in to the camera while the woman always look into the camera. According to objectification theory, the implicit and explicit sexual objectification of the female body in Western culture produces a multitude of negative consequences for women and the primary psychological consequence of sexual objectification is the development of an unnatural perspective on the self known as self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Mulvey's (1975) arguments work to position the spectator as almost always male and heterosexual (Saco 1992). This also assume heteronormativity when it comes to the object of the photograph, the female pose thinking a heterosexual man will look at the picture.

Blogs with Today's Outfits

In a Swedish and Scandinavian context blogs have become increasingly common and young women and men frequently post their self-portraits taken with digital cameras online. The photos are often categorized as "Today's Outfit", where the bloggers pose in the cloths that they are wearing that day. Van House, Davis,

Ames, Finn, and Viswanathan (2005) have identified four social uses of personal photographs. First is memory, narrative and identity, second they reflect and sustained relationships, third they are used for self-representation and fourth they are used for self-expression.

The empirical material in this article consists of photographs of today's outfit in seven blogs and correspondence with the bloggers through e-mail. All of the seven blogs are personal blogs written by women and men between the age 18 and 30. The material has been narrowed down by only studying the photographs, not text. I have chosen to look closer at characteristic and non-characteristic poses for all of the seven blogs instead of singular poses in a singular blog.

Since outfits and cloths are categorized as fashion I started by choosing the blogs that were the most popular fashion blogs in Sweden, and very often posted photographs of themselves in today's outfits. During the year 2007 the Swedish tabloid paper named Aftonbladet arranged a competition for the best Swedish fashion blog. Aftonbladet decided that the twentyfive most visited blogs under the category fashion and design on the online blog portal www.bloggportalen.se (which could be compared to the Englich www.technorati.com) would be nominated for the price. The readers of Aftonbladet voted online for the winner. The winner of the contest during 2007 was Engla's showroom with 44,4% of the votes. Engla writes that her blog is called a showroom since it shows the best parts of her life. The contesting blogs were all private, meaning not having a commercial partner, written by women and the majority of the blog posts were about fashion. I contacted all the twentyfive nominees asking for permission to analyze their photographs and publish the photographs in an article. The three, of the twentyfive bloggers, that gave me permission was included in my empirical material. The other four blogs was found by searching for Swedish blogs consisting of today's outfit on search engines, by following links on other blogs and searching on www.bloggportalen.se.

Regarding the blogosphere in Sweden Jan Kullin (2008) did a quantitative study of the Swedish bloggers. According to the study 53% of the female blog readers wanted to read about fashion and design, while the same category did not occur among male readers. Trying to establish how many Swedish blogs about fashion exist would be an impossible task, certain is that they have increased a lot the last years. There exist very few male bloggers that post today's outfits. Most of the male bloggers who write about fashion are working on fashion newspapers and do not post pictures of them selves.

Bloggportalen consisted of 31218 blogs in the beginning of July 2008 and of them 5389 were under the category for fashion and design. Subcategories are (in order of rank) general fashion (3863), women's fashion (3226), general and other (2587), things (2289), home furnishing (1337), perfume (1326), men's fashion (957), graphic design (709), current events (664), fashion and companies (654), design and companies (632), web design (581), architecture (370) and journalists (328).

To Show your Outfit – to Construct Yourself

As Walker (2005) states, to be photographed is to be objectified and to photograph is to be a subject with the right to define the world. I asked the bloggers if they take their pictures by themselves or if they have a friend helping. One of the bloggers answered my question with:

> *I like to take pictures and the best model is me. Even if the only purpose is to take a today's outfit picture of myself for the blog I like when I turn out great on the picture. I usually don't think too much about posing since the clothes are the important thing on the picture. I find ways of posing on the internet. I take the pictures of my self since I'm too embarrassed to ask someone else to take them. Usually my face is shown and I always choose the pictures that I'm most satisfied with.*

Most of the other bloggers stated, as well, that they take the pictures themselves. Only one blogger mentioned that her sister sometimes takes the pictures of her. One blogger stated that the main reason for taking photographs of today's outfit was that she felt that it created a closer relationship to her readers. Since the bloggers take self-portraits they are both objectified and subjects at the same time. While they create pictures of themselves they strive to mediate exterior images that correspond with the inner image that they carry of themselves. Similar conclusions have been drawn for example by Anette Göthlund (1997) in her study about self images of teenage girls and the connection to esthetics and identity. According to Lasén and Gómez-Cruz (2009) being visible, being present, in front of a crowd of strangers is one of the aspects of being public which nowadays is performed at the junction of online and offline places. This form of visibility, and other's gaze, guarantee the subject's being. Objectification and being a subject is therefore closely connected to the gaze. One could argue that a gaze is actually the condition for something or someone to be an object or a subject. In this article I have chosen to look closer at the use of the male gaze and how the identity, gender and body are expressed. In this chapter the focus will be of photographs of the today's outfit in regard to these questions.

In many photographs the blogger has chosen not to meet the eye of the camera and there for not the eye of the viewer. Here are some examples:

Figure 1. To the left a picture of today's outfit by Engla, in the middle a today's outfit by Stinalee and to the right a today's outfit by Breachofstyle.

The face and in particular the eyes are traditionally seen as the mirror to the person's soul, the inner true self. This argument would mean that to avoid the gaze is to dehumanize the object. Deprived the gaze of one's own the object is becoming an inactive object which can be viewed by an outsider. (Eriksson & Göthlund 2004, 59) To be able to look into the viewers eyes is to have the power, the active role and the possibility to appear as a subject. The three photographs and poses above can also be analyzed in a different way. The bloggers are so strong that they do not need to meet the eye of the viewer, but even then they do not appear to be active and therefore subjects. In some other examples the bloggers have cut the photographs just above their heads:

Figure 2. To the left a today's outfit from Engla, in the middle a today's outfit by W2best and to the right a today's outfit from Breachofstyle.

In this way they also avoid meeting the eye of the viewer, but the cloths are more the object of the photograph than the blogger wearing the cloths is. There are examples where the cloths really are in the center:

Figure 3. To the left a photograph of today's out fit by Stinalee and to the right a photograph of today's outfit by Stilrobin.

Something crossing my mind while looking at these fragments of self-portraits is, while the clothes are really in the center and therefore could be expressed as most important, they do not really give a good

picture of the actual cloths. In the second picture, for example, you only see a fragment of something that could be a costume and on the first picture you can see part of the bikini and the shorts but the focus is on the stomach, a bare, sunburned, flat stomach. The male blogger stands with his feet a bit apart from each other, he stands firm with his left hand in his pocket, while the female blogger stands with her knees close together, holding her arms and hands so they are not seen on the picture. The blogger is the object of the photograph instead of the cloths, at the same time as the choice of cloths can give a picture of the bloggers identity. She has chosen to portrait herself in a bikini and he has portrait himself wearing a costume. And again, the face or head is not shown.

There are several who never show their whole body or their faces in their pictures. One of the reasons may be that they do not want to be re-cognized or that they do not wish to have to think about their facial expression, make up or hair. There are also several examples where the blogger make the face blurry or in other ways hide their faces. One of the blogger always covers his face:

Figure 4: Three versions of today's outfit by Breachofstyle. In the photograph to the right he has covered his face with a picture of the actor James Dean.

Another of the studied bloggers has also used boxes to cover his faces in some of the photographs of today's outfit:

Figure 5. Two examples of today's outfit by John Valencia.

In the photograph to the left the head is covered with red box with the word BLÄ (in English Ick). In the example to the right the head is covered with a box with the text (translated to English): "The head is behind the box for your own sake. The thing behind the box is not human." The picture is then commented by a visitor: "Tss.. you have a face of a model John! You should be proud.

Gender, the mirror and posing in today's outfit

As seen in photograph to the right in figure 2 the blogger has used a mirror while taking the photograph. At the same time as the mirror can be seen as a convenient aid to take a self-portrait it can also be seen as something else. Seeing your mirror image is part of the way in which you learn to conceive of your self (Walker 2005). The way a mirror is used to try out different outfits or facial expressions in the private room, the blog can be seen as a more public mirror. All of the bloggers interviewed said that they take a lot of pictures, in fact as many as needed to get pictures that they are comfortable with. Walker (2005) state that we are not simply interested in presenting an image, we are creating versions of ourselves. The today's outfit does not just show the clothes. In the beginning of 2008 a discussion started among the bloggers about not calling these pictures "today's outfit" but instead "today's me", which is something that is spreading among fashion bloggers.

Thomas, (2004) who has studied avatars online, has concluded that the screen offers both a safe and private place to explore their fantasies, yet with an audience that can make judgments about their performances of femininity. This can also be applied to today's outfits. Though, it seems like the male

bloggers seldom receive comments on their outfits, female bloggers can receive up to 120 comments on one of their outfits. Engla, who were voted the best fashion blogger during 2007, express her depreciation of some of the comments she receive: "Do you know what? I'm totally angry with some of you. You are so evil. On a daily basis I'm attacked because of my body. [...] I have to tolerate a bit since I have a big blog and show my self and my outfit on a daily basis. I tolerate most things and most of the comments are written in a positive spirit. I thank you for that! But I don't tolerate the comments I get from people who are insecure about their own body and self and put their troubles on me."

(http://www.englasshowroom.com on the 10.4.2008)

This shows that the blog as a mirror can sometimes be used in not planed ways. But still, communication is one of the most important social circumstance and condition for identities to be created. Göthlund (1997, 57) argue that we learn different roles by playing and playing is necessary for self reflection. Without self reflection we can not understand our selves. The individual has to become objectified for them selves. (George Herbert Mead 1934/1976, s. 11, 114f)

One blogger that play with the mirror more than other bloggers is John Valencia. It seems like he is well aware of what the mirror means and he is not afraid to use it both as an aid but also as a toy. Here is one example:

Figure 6. John Valencia in today's outfit, holding a mirror in front of his face

The mirror is covering his face and can be seen as equal to a box covering the head. The mirror can also be a way for John Valencia to look at his own identity, at the same time as the viewer look at his identity while looking at the outfit and his pose. In a way the mirror can also be seen related to self-scrutiny. According to La Belle (1988, 9) mirrors and veils both tend to be seen as feminine and that they mean something different to women than they do to men. La Belle (1988) has found in her search very few

pictures in which men use the mirror for acts of self-scrutiny. According to a content analysis (Huffaker & Calvert 2005) of a sample of 204 weblogs found that the blogs created by young males and females are more alike than different.

Concentrating on gender there are a lot more girls and women than boys and men posting today's outfits of themselves in the blog, but if you look at the pictures that are posted by both gender there are hardly any differences in the poses in regard of gender. Since the clothes seem to be the most important in the picture of today's outfit the blogger may (unconsciously) dismiss the eyes of an imagined man by not looking in the camera. Berger (1972) has stated that women watch themselves being looked at, meaning that women are acculturated to looks at themselves through the eyes of an imagined man because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male. Since girl's and women first started with these kinds of pictures the boy's and men might have followed by copying the poses without reflecting on possible the viewer.

As mentioned earlier the differences between genders seem to be few and at a first glance. Therefore, theories about the male gaze do not seem to be applicable at a first glance. Almost identical poses are being used regardless of sex, while there are big differences in professional fashion photographs. Looking closer there are some differences though that the viewer can notice after reading for example Richard Dyer's (1992) description of the gaze of males in images aimed at women. Dyer (1992, 104-9) writes that where the female model typically averts her eyes, expressing modesty, patience and a lack of interest in anything else, the male model looks either off or up. In the case of the former, his look suggests an interest in something else that the viewer cannot see. In the cases where the model is looking up, this suggests a spirituality, he might be there for his face and body to be gazed at, but his mind is on higher things, and it is this upward striving that is most supposed to please.

In advertisements women are more often pictured than men in what Goffman (1979, 41) calls the recumbent position on floors, often associated with something less clean. Examples of these pictures exist in blogs but are very few. Goffman (1979, 46) also points out that women are often posed bending their heads or bodies at an angle, I.e., "cant." The effect of cant, he says, is that the level of the head is lowered relative to that of others, including, indirectly, the viewer of the picture. The resulting configurations can be read as an acceptance of subordination, an expression of integration, submissiveness, and appeasement. Below are two examples from the one blogger.

Figure 7. Two examples from Beautifulones

I have never come across a male posing like in photographs of figure 7. There are very few pictures of male bloggers sitting or laying down. In the blogs I have analyzed I have only found examples in one blog. In these examples the blogger can be seen as more active than in the pictures from the female blogger. In picture 18 he appears to be doing his shoe laces and in the second picture of picture 17 he is sitting down relaxed, without seeming submissive. Actually the viewer is even lower than the object, while the female in the pictures above is lower than the viewer.

Figure 8. Two examples of today's outfit by Stilrobin

According to Eriksson and Göthlund there are different visual strategies to disarm the female gaze. One is to have the posing female to look away and by those means make her more available as an enjoyable eye-catcher, another way is to have her shut her eyes and a third way is to cut the picture by her neck (as many photographs have been cut in today's outfit). On a psychoanalytical level this

can be seen as means to fetischize the model. By partly presenting the woman, she is still tempting to look at but at the same time harmless (Eriksson & Göthlund 2004, 60). In the photograph below the blogger Beautifulones meet the eye of the viewer:

Figure 9. Example from Beautifulones

The blogger Beautifulones has several pictures of her face in her blog, this is very rare among bloggers posting today's outfit. In several of these pictures she has her mouth a bit open and her finger in her mouth, as we can see above. Interesting is that you can not see her eyes. Her hair falls down in front of her eye and the other is not really in the picture. But even if she meets the eye of the viewer she can still be seen as available and as an enjoyable eye-catcher, since she has her mouth open and her finger in it. The viewer can only see a little piece of her cloths.

Conclusion

The aim of this study has been to look at how identity is staged in photographs of today's outfit. How can the photographs of today's outfit be categorized as self-portraits? Are there differences and similarities in the posing? Is the posing performative? How are gender and the body staged? Is the male gaze used by the bloggers? As Yvonne Eriksson and Anette Göthlund (2004, 49) state today's fashion photographs express a lot of different messages, several more messages than the clothes can reflect by themselves. In some photographs the clothes can seem invisible while the body expresses identities, dreams and a sense of community.

While I noticed that several of the bloggers did not show their face in the pictures even if they posted pictures of themselves, I also noticed that several did not smile or look in to the camera. In several of the today's outfits the eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, or the blogger looks away from the camera even if

the face otherwise is shown. None of the interviewed bloggers had an answer to why they did not look into the camera even if they usually took those kinds of pictures of themselves. This is interesting since in traditional self-portraits the face is most important and the eyes are said to be the mirror of the soul. In other examples the photograph had been cut just above the neck or the head was covered.

In the beginning of my project I was amazed of how similar the photos of today's outfit were. My suspicion that the bloggers posing were inspired by each other was confirmed in the interviews. What happens when people take their own self-portrait and publish it online? There seem to be few differences at a first glance. Looking closer, though, we can see that there are fewer differences between pictures taken by and of males and females in the blogs that I have studied. There are still some differences like; I could find a female posing in a sexually provocative posture on the ground but not a man. Even if the blog owners seem to have the power to express themselves as they want in a fairly new media, norms change fairly slowly. Social and cultural norms of how a man or a woman can pose are still present.

References

Avgitidou, Angeliki (2003). Performances of the Self. *Digital Creativity.* (14) 3, 131-138.

Berger John (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin.

Bolter Jay David & Grusin Richard (1999). *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. The MIT Press

Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Great Britain

Dyer, Richard (1992). 'Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up'. In Caughie et al. (Eds.) *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*. London: Routledge

Eriksson Yvonne & Göthlund Anette (2004). *Möten med bilder*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Fornäs Johan (1991). Narcissus och det Andra. Könsordningens särskiljanden och sammanfogningar. In Johan Fornäs, Ulf Boëthius & Sabina Cwejman (Ed.) *Kön och identitet i förändring*, Stockholm: FUS-rapport.

Fredrickson, B. L., and Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 21,* 173– 206.

Goffman Erving (1979). *Gender Advertisements*. Harper

Göthlund Anette (1997). *Bilder av tonårsflickor Om estetik och identitetsarbete*. Linköping: Linköping University Press.

Huffaker, D. A., and Calvert, S. L. (2005). Gender, identity, and language use in teenage blogs. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(2), article 1.

La Belle J. (1988). *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*. London: Cornell University Press.

Lasén, Amparo and Gómez-Cruz (2009). Digital Photography and Picture Sharing: Redefining the Public/Private Divide. *Knowledge, Technology & Policy* 22 (3).

Kullin Jan (2008). *BloggSverige 3*

Mead George Herbert (1934/1976). *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mulvey Laura (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen* 16 (3).

Saco, Diana (1992). Masculinity as signs: Poststructuralist feminist approaches to the study of gender, In: Craig, Steve, ed, *Men, Masculinity and the Media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Thomas Angela (2004). Digital Literacies of the Cybergirl, *E-Learning* 1 (3).

Van House, N. A., Davis, M., Ames, M., Finn, M., and Viswanathan, V. (2005). The Uses of Personal Networked Digital Imaging: An Empirical Study of Cameraphone Photos and Sharing, in *Ext Abs CHI 2005*, ACM Press.

Walker, Jill (2005). Mirrors and shadows: The digital Aestheticisation of Oneself. Paper, presented at *Digital Arts and Culture 2005*, Dec 1-3 in Copenhagen.

Sources for pictures of Today's Outfit

Beautifulones, http://www.beautifulones.blogg.se

Breachofstyle, http://www.breachofstyle.blogg.se

Engla's Showroom, http://www.annamirjamaria.blogg.se

John Valencia, http://www.johnvalencia.blogg.se

Stilrobin, http://www.stilrobin.com

Stina Lee, http://www.stinalee.se

W2best, http://www.w2best.blogg.se