

# Vision and Intimacy

## *Gendered Communication Online*

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### **Abstract**

One emerging form of communication discussed in the present article is the use of visual self-representation as a tool for symbolic interaction between young people on the Internet. Using examples of difference and similarity in young women's and men's visual self-representation, the article offers an interpretation of these practices, pointing towards both new visual conventions and references to pre-existing media representations, thus revealing a process of *hypervisuality*. In this process of transformation, the involvement of new technologies, such as webcam aesthetics and its form of intimacy and authenticity, produces specific visual conventions within the frame of pre-existing media imagery, when the self is presented in online communication.

**Keywords:** gender, youth, visual communication, webcam aesthetics

### **Introduction**

New communication technology, such as the Internet, forms new social environments and possibilities for interaction. In this social milieu, we can interact with others unrestricted by the usual boundaries of time or space, and we can see and be seen without being physically present, hence extending Thompson's (2005) notion of mediated visibility to include reciprocity. As the Internet is a mass medium not only for mass consumption but also for mass production, it allows us to publish and present ourselves without editing or interference from others.<sup>1</sup> Because this apparently transparent technology permits more unmediated versions of the self, notions of intimacy and authenticity play an important role in relation to how the body is displayed visually.

Cyberspace has been typically defined as a space in which *disembodied* communication takes place, implying that bodies can only meet off-line (cf. Gwinnell 1998; McRae 1996). Questioning this viewpoint, Whitty (2003) argues that we need a broader interpretation of how the body can be experienced and reconstructed online. Although our physical body is not present, it is still imperative to the success of many interpersonal interactions over the Internet, not least in visual communication acts.

An emerging form of communication between young people on the Internet is the use of visual self-representation as a tool for symbolic interaction. This brings to the fore questions of how the self is constructed and presented in relation to new technologies and in relation to pre-existing images off-line. Is the Internet encouraging novel forms and strategies for visual self-representation? Does the technology formulate alternative

figurations, which reject and reverse the stereotyped and rather restrictive perception of the gendered body in images off-line?

The present article is based on an investigation of the relationship between young girls' and boys' self-portraits on the popular website Snyggast.se (roughly translated as *Best Looking*) in Sweden. The sample consists of 400 self-portraits, which all belong to the top-ten lists, meaning pictures that have received the highest scores.<sup>2</sup> This visual communication will also be discussed with reference to popular media imagery, the cultural embodiment of sexuality and perceptions of intimacy and authenticity.

## Vision and Voting

Communicating and presenting oneself through self-portraits is not a new practice; websites like Snyggast.se, however do place them in a new interactive context, which is made possible by the technology and the social framing offered by the Internet. On this site, self-portraits are not just there to be looked at, they are also judged according to a voting system, which allows them to be ranked from 1 (labelled "ugh") to 10 (labelled "wow!"). The best ranked then appear on the top-ten lists. The viewer/voter also has the possibility to write comments that will appear under the image for all visitors to read. Owing to the voting and commenting system, these self-portraits, and hence the body, are "on stage" in quite a literal sense. By linking the procedure of looking to a voting system, the relationship between the subject and the viewer comes to be based on an interactive response that assigns the latter a central position as evaluator. Thus, self-portraits on Snyggast.se are both means for communication with others (foremost the opposite sex, as the site's framing is clearly heterosexual) and tools by which confirmation and approval are sought.

Given that all self-portraits are placed in a scoring system, one can assume that this will influence the visual strategies used by the teenagers. Even if one is not aiming for high scores, receiving comments or points based on the presence (or absence) of certain attributes of one's appearance cannot be avoided. Communicating oneself through photographs simultaneously narrows and highlights possible aspects of the self. While textual presentations may include interests, hobbies, nuances, and even contradictions, images allow for fewer but also more intense dimensions of the self to be expressed. By assuming various poses, the body displays different signs of emotions that are symbolically transmitted to the viewer (if she/he is part of the same cultural context). These may include a sort of visual script for longing, happiness, sadness, assertiveness, excitement, loneliness, indifference and so on. The perception that photographs have the ability to visualize emotional "truth" (whether or not they actually do) is in part due to the ontological realism connected to photographic production in general (Barthes 1977, 1981; Mitchell 1994).

When it comes to self-portraits, questions of photographic "truth" or authenticity are ambiguous. On the one hand, we choose how to expose ourselves and what aspects to highlight; on the other hand, the practice of the self-portrait always implies a certain distance of the "I", where we regard ourselves from an outside position in order to make ourselves into a picture (cf. Haverty-Rugg 1997). While we usually employ many visual codes from face-to-face interaction, we nevertheless effect a certain camera behaviour when a picture is to be taken. Or in the words of Barthes (1981), we fabricate ourselves

into an image-body, freezing certain movements, sometimes using poses that outside this framing would appear exaggerated. It is in this procedure of selecting poses and expressions for self presentation that the authenticity of self-portraits can be traced. New technology also increases our possibilities to present a more satisfactory version of the self, allowing us to delete images until we are satisfied. Earlier studies conducted in the USA have shown, for example, that young people are very eager to present a self-image that gives a mature impression and is in tune with the fashion codes in one's own group (Chandler & Roberts-Young 1998).<sup>3</sup>

When the image of oneself is produced for public display to be explicitly evaluated and ranked, as is the case on Snyggast.se, the visual strategies used by girls and boys on the top-ten lists can be assumed to refer to codes thought to be highly appreciated by the viewer/voter, and hence to display what are considered to be valued and "correct" versions of visual heterosexual femininity and masculinity.

## **Gender and Media Imagery**

As stated by Kellner (1995), our visual media culture provides many of the resources for how we come to understand and see ourselves. Depictions of gender in various media have been analysed by a number of researchers, many of whom have concluded that visual representations, ranging from news coverage to sports, fiction and advertising, tend to be stereotypical portraits of both women and men (among others Zavoina 1999).

A study of all photographic material in four Swedish magazines aimed at young men and women revealed that most of the photographic material depicted women. In addition, a large proportion of these photographs emphasized body-ism as the visual representation of femininity, that is, a half-or full-body perspective. Visual representations of men, on the other hand, emphasized facial prominence, often with a non-smiling and stern expression (Hirdman 2006). Earlier studies on visual depictions of gender in traditional media have also pointed to differences in relation to face-ism or body-ism (Archer et al 1983, Unger & Crawford 2003). Body-ism and/or face-ism per se cannot be said to indicate any fixed value, but is dependent on the framing context. However, this strong division between facial masculinity and corporeal femininity seems to live on in popular media representations, presenting men as less corporeal and in diverse contexts while linking notions of intimacy and sexuality to the female body.<sup>4</sup>

This is also evident in the Swedish weekly magazine aimed at young women, *Vecko-revyn*, and the Swedish monthly lads magazine *Moore*, aimed at young men. The highly successful genre of lads' magazines, introduced in Sweden, as in many Western countries, during the 1990's, reflects a concept of masculinity as simple and straightforward, and typically connected to "booze, chicks and cars". Here the feminine figure is firmly placed within a traditional soft-porn aesthetic, characterized by highly standardized alluring facial and body poses and with a typical "girl-next-door" framing (Kuhn 1985; Zavoina 1999; Hirdman 2008). There is also an emphasis on the high, round, surgically enhanced bosom, usually depicted as a visually marked cleavage.<sup>5</sup> Female embodiment of sexuality in soft-porn is based on accessibility projected through poses and gazes employed to form bonds of intimacy and complicity with the onlooker. The authenticity carried by the soft-porn image is not in bodies "doing sex", as in hard-core porn, but in

the illusion of this “real” intimate relationship evoked by the image’s modes of address; the message being “I am here for you – Do you like what you see?” Hence, this illusion of accessibility is in itself gender specific.<sup>6</sup>

In *Veckorevyn*, female body-ism also refers to sexual rhetoric, not by being there to “do desire”, but rather to be visually judged according to this standard. Whether in snapshot images of half-naked, famous women or in more traditional pinup images (of actress Pamela Andersen or the ex-Playboy model Victoria Silvstedt, for example), a scrutinizing and evaluative gaze is directed towards the female body. This is usually followed by critical editorial comments concerning breast size, bottom size, cellulite, lips and so on, thereby constructing femininity as a state of constant bodily self-awareness (Hirdman 2006).

Thus, the female figure embodies different forms of sexuality in different types of media genres. Aimed at a female audience she stands as an idealized body, illustrating the benefits of corporeal improvement and transformation. Aimed at a male audience, she incarnates notions of both female and male desire (Hirdman 2008).

## Webcam Intimacy

A major part of the self-portraits on Snyggast.se are amateur photos, taken with a webcam. The webcam technology forms a particular aesthetic, linked to intimacy and authenticity by factors such as lack of editing and limited movement of camera angles as well as a heightened sense of immediacy. By being tied to the computer and not used in public settings, the photographic act appears as a more direct, unmediated extension of the person. Therefore, the webcam, almost regardless of the type of content, appears to reduce the level of mediation and locate the viewer as a virtual participant and thus, creating a more intimate viewing position. According to Bolter and Grusin (2002), the webcam comes, in this way, to stand for both connectivity and reality. Or as White puts it:

Webcams [...] appear to be real and to provide access to material bodies because they direct the users attention to the referent – what is depicted – rather than the representation (2003: 12).

In self-portraits these associations to a “real” self, that is a self not previously publicly exposed, intensifies a sense of closeness in relation to the viewer, a pure visualized one-to-one relation.<sup>7</sup> Due to the limited movement and depth of the camera eye, the webcam also requires the person to adjust more to the lens than do traditional cameras. This leads to body poses that are less common in other photographic settings, poses that therefore become specific and easily read signs of intimacy linked to this technology. In webcam self-representation, the notion of intimacy is thus intertwined with notions of authenticity, both playing with binaries of public/private, and of artificial/real. Hence, webcam intimacy on Snyggast.se is constructed by technological limitations (space and direction), by appearing as less mediated, by the milieu, which is often a highly private setting (such as one’s own room), and by the authenticity of the self-portrait as genre.

## “Hot body?”

Over the studied period, all the girls on the top-ten lists refer, in one way or another, to conventional sexual rhetoric, including poses, facial expressions and gazes. The most common image is a close-up showing face and cleavage (the slim low cut camisole is by far the most common clothing), with a non-smiling facial expression.

Some body modes are specific to webcam posing, and all of these are used to promote depiction of the cleavage, where the head is positioned so that face and cleavage are given equal image space. In some images, this can be combined with a somewhat flirtatious gaze, producing what Kuhn (1985) refers to as the “come-on look”. Within soft-porn rhetoric, this is a familiar convention for insinuating desire. The come-on-look produces the illusion of a one-to-one relationship with the onlooker and an obvious wish to evoke an emotional response of desire.

More common, however, is a high camera angle where the head is tilted and the gaze averted, establishing a scene in which the viewer looks down into the cleavage. This body mode presents a somewhat classic peeping-Tom voyeurism, with the girl not overtly acknowledging the viewer by appearing to be unaware that she is being looked at (cf. Berkeley 1995; Lutz & Collins 1993). The lowered, or averted, gaze can also be understood as a sign of allowing oneself to be examined, while at the same time implying “decency”. In contrast to the complicity of meeting the onlooker’s gaze, the subject appears more innocent, as if not involved in the act of looking and therefore not, so to speak, responsible for the display.

An interesting composition that seems to appear with increasing frequency is the mix of digital camera and webcam aesthetics. The camera is held high over the head producing an image in which the head and cleavage are in focus (as in the webcam composition), while the rest of the body, or rather the stomach and hips, are visibly as in a curved mirror. Here a webcam aesthetic (room/space perspective) is employed, but transferred to another photographic device. The body impression given is quite unusual, reminiscent of art photos from the 1930s that play with surrealistic forms and optical illusions.<sup>8</sup> Of course the main purpose on Snyggast.se is to highlight face and cleavage while displaying the whole upper body, but to still refer to conventions created by the webcam and the intimacy and/or authenticity it implies.

The promoted girls position themselves in various ways for an imaginary viewer/voter, either through their direct gaze and/or by pushing their body towards the camera lens. The camera eye works both as a mirror, with narcissistic implications, and as a window to the viewer and his/her reaction (O’Riordan 2002; Gade 2004). The “participation” of the viewer appears to be necessary for the image to achieve its modes of address. This is also evident in the captions accompanying the pictures, where questions concerning how one is perceived are common (“Pretty?”, “Hot body?”), as well as pleas to the viewer (“A 10 please...”, “Please vote nicely”). The viewer/voter is given a central position both visually and textually.

What is being played out in this symbolic interaction is a form of auto-narcissism, where the main goal is a reaction that confirms the girls’ positions as desired subjects. This process of symbolic recognition of themselves as hypererotized sights and of the viewer as evaluator seems to be central in presenting a correct version of femininity.

On these top-ten lists, the communication of a feminine self stresses bodily self-awareness through references to sexual rhetoric – which is made especially evident by

the prominence given to the cleavage and the collusive relation to the onlooker. This indicates incorporations of media codes for femininity typically used in images off-line.

Within the frame of traditional sexual rhetoric, however, the visual display of femininity is developed and transformed with specific body arrangements characteristic of webcam aesthetics. When poses are considered too exaggerated or too evident in their references to images off-line – such as a pose bent slightly too far forward or a bosom just a bit too big – comments, from mostly other girls, can sometimes be harsh. They may say that the girl (over)uses her body as a way to get votes and is therefore a “slut” or/and “remade” (most often a reference to surgical breast enlargement), and thus not thought to present an authentic self.

Nevertheless, negative comments made by other girls do not appear to have a great impact, as these more performative images keep appearing on the lists – and keep getting high scores from male voters. Negative responses are also counterbalanced by approving, flirtatious and sometimes sexual comments from males; “You’re soo sexy, sexy 10 points”, “Great breasts!”, “I love your body”, “Can I Touch”, “Ohh Hot body”, and so on. Gratification gained from male viewers/voters appears to be of more importance than cruel comments made by other girls, perhaps because male approval is equated with public approval and constitutes the definition of female attractiveness.

## **Distant Faces**

Over the years, some noticeable changes have occurred in how the boys on the top-ten lists present themselves. Up until 2008, they largely avoided gestures or expressions that could signal sexuality, accessibility or any form of intimate relationship to the viewer. A close-up with a non-smiling expression and the gaze turned away from the viewer was the most frequent shot. Overall, the self-portraits were often characterized by non-engagement with the viewer, illustrated by a moody stare or a stern expression, as well as by the use of a variety of poses, usually including an arm or a hand. In many images, the hand rested on the chin, the mouth or on the head, indicating what Dyer (2002) refers to as a pose of elevation, which illustrates that one’s thoughts are directed towards higher matters and therefore are not engaged with the onlooker. The emotional associations sought with these poses are seriousness, thoughtfulness and a preoccupation with one’s thoughts.

A common pose was the arm wrapped around the upper body, as if to comfort (or protect?) oneself, transmitting a more melancholic feeling. Combined with the averted gaze, this form of self-touching indicated in many respects a reserved, self-directed and sad masculinity. In another frequent body mode, the arm was held high and the hand scratching or holding the head, trying to achieve a non-deliberate pose, while at the same time exposing the upper body.

In general, the boys employed various strategies to avoid entering into an explicit relationship with the viewer. Questions or pleas to the viewer/voter were also – and still are – very rare. The most common category of captions is “I”, “Me”, followed by onomatopoetic expressions such as “aggh”.

The frequent use of arms and hands in the self-portraits between 2004 and 2008 pointed towards a need in webcam posing to construct a specific masculine sign. Gestures that stress activity and engagement with oneself rather than with the onlooker

are also a typical way to present men in off-line images. On Snyggast.se, these visual conventions can counteract the unsafe position that displaying oneself as a visual subject for evaluation could convey – that is, its cultural references to femininity.

As stated, the boys often appear absorbed in themselves, and the engagement offered to the viewer is to puzzle over what they might be thinking or feeling. Visual distance in relation to the viewer/voter, along with expressions of melancholy, sadness or non-engagement, appears to correlate with an appropriate version of (heterosexual) masculinity.

Although all of these visual strategies are still present in many images – underlining aloofness as a masculine trait – new ways of presenting oneself have emerged during 2009. Self-portraits showing naked upper bodies, undressing in front of the mirror and large smiling faces with the gaze directed outwards are now more common. All of these are body modes that address and acknowledge the (female) viewer and create a scene based on her “participation”. Previously bodily awareness, manifested in almost all of the girls’ self-portraits, was not only absent from the boys’ self-presentations, it was a frame of reference they actively worked against. Even if they still rely on facial prominence to a high degree, images of a more corporeal masculinity can be seen, as well as a more direct mode of address to the viewer/voter.

How can these new modes of self-presentation be understood? To begin with, the boys’ self-portraits represent a visual practice that is rarely seen in public (or semipublic) arenas: images of heterosexual young men directed to a heterosexual female viewer for explicit evaluation. To place oneself, as a young man, in the position of someone who seeks approval from the viewer is linked, in traditional media, to a destabilized heterosexual identity. On Snyggast.se, the boys are also reluctant to occupy this feminized visual position (in the few images where they do expose the body, their faces are averted). Yet previously these images were totally absent. It could be that the practice of presenting oneself visually for evaluation is no longer new (the site has existed since 2003), and photo-blogging as well as the habit of constantly snapping pictures of oneself is part of a Westernized youth culture. It could also be a reflection of a visual culture in which eroticized male bodies are becoming more widespread. While the body occupying the main focus in today’s media landscape, and on which sexuality is written, is still the young, often white, female body, male bodies are starting to appear in what has been referred to as a more feminized and eroticized manner (Solomon-Godeau 1997; Bordo 1999a). Numerous studies of young women have shown a strong connection between attitudes towards one’s own body and gendered media representations (cf. Tan 1979; Stice, Spangler, & Agras 2001; Ward, & Harrison 2005).<sup>9</sup> Questions concerning effects on young men’s self-perception and media representations, however, remain understudied. Still, some emerging research does indicate an influence on young men’s self-image with regard to visually represented versions of bodily masculinity (Harrison et al. 2000; Sørensen 2006).

## **Authenticity and Gender**

The mimicking of mediatized gender codes is obvious in the girls’ willingness to refer to standardized sexual rhetoric and also largely in the boys’ accentuation of face-ism and detachment from the viewer. At the same time, the girls and the boys create their own

visual conventions. The relation to an already existing visual version of the self can be comprehended as a form of *hypervisuality*, where visual codes referred to are simultaneously reworked. On Snyggast.se this process is due to the technological restrictions of webcams and the search for “correct” and authentic gender representations through references to *and* rejection of media imagery.

One specific facial expression on these lists, used by both girls and boys, is the empty or void look – the mouth is closed and the eyes stare out into the distance – which primarily transmits feelings of loneliness and misery. In the girls’ portraits, this look is often combined with exposure of the upper body, resulting in an impression of vulnerability, as if they are not mentally present in the act of displaying their body. For the boys, it often consists of a facial close up, or an arm wrapped around the body.

It has been said that one characteristic trait of the new MeWe generation, born in the 1980s and later, is the search for authenticity as a *feeling* of trustworthiness where: “[A]ll staged experiences are by their nature unreal or fake” (Lindgren et al. 2005). Being authentic and reliable therefore entails displaying oneself as an emotionally trustworthy person. According to Sernhede (1995), this search for intimacy and “a true feeling” is a way of dealing with experiences of insecurity inflicted upon the individual, especially adolescents, by the reflexivity of modernity.

In this perspective, the empty look in the self-portraits could be a way of displaying, in Goffman’s (1990) words, a sort of back-stage *emotion*. This is not a facial expression commonly worn in public together with friends, in school, etc, and for this reason it might be conceived as a more authentic aspect of the self – an appearance used when one is by oneself and does not have to pretend to feel or appear in a certain way.

However, on Snyggast.se, notions of authenticity primarily concern the female body. In the process of enhancing their image by means of hypererotization, the girls have also to relate to ideas of an “authentic femininity”, which is not linked to the unique expression, but rather to conformity and references to existing (off-line) images. In this sense, authenticity is equated with *recognition* of an already visualized eroticized body.<sup>10</sup> This could be seen as a sign of the long claimed masquerade status of femininity; the disposition of femininity *as* image, as culturally essentialized into visual elements (among others Tseélon 1995; Doane 1991).

Notions of an authentic masculinity, however, do not seem to be an issue in the boys’ performance of visual masculinity, whether they display large smiling faces, non-engagements or emotions of vulnerability. Certain bodies – such as the white male body – can expand rather than condense values without being considered “fake” (Hirdman 2008).

These self-portraits show that what seems to be regarded as incompatible with an idealized feminine version of the self are bodily unawareness and indifference towards the viewer – qualities that, on the other hand, characterize the ideal version of masculinity referred to by the boys. Thus, while the Internet does allow us to communicate without being limited by categories and cultural meanings connected to the body (race, gender, age, class), the body is still the map on which we mark our meaning, both individually and socially. As previous studies on Internet communication between heterosexual men and women have indicated, one can see a strong *hypergendering* in which references to traditional gender positions are evident (O’Brien 1999; Herring 2003). According to Springer (1996), instead of producing experimental identities, this lack of constraints on



online performance can provide an occasion to realize, the most conventional off-line gender aspirations. In line with these thoughts, hypergendered performance would confirm the regulation of performance through discourses and powers such as compulsory heterosexuality and conventional social identities.

Still, some new tendencies are flourishing as well. Whereas the feminine body is largely displayed according to traditional gender conventions and more traditional looking relations, a new arena for visual gender representation is seen in the young men's self-representation that could point towards new looking relations. Although the young male body is present today, foremost in advertisements, it is usually presented in a dual marketing way, attracting both heterosexual and homosexual *male* consumers (Bordo 1999b; Rohlinger 2002). There are still very few traditional media arenas where male bodies are on display for *evaluative* female gazes. In this perspective, Snyggast.se offers (in a tentative way) a model for feminine spectatorship that traditional media do not.

## Notes

1. It is of course clear that neither concepts of "mass" nor concepts of "medium" can be precisely defined when talking about the Internet (Morris & Ogan 1996). Different situations and different means for communication on the Internet, such as e-mail (textually based) and webcams (visually based), have their own implications for communication.
2. These lists can change somewhat during a day. The images have been downloaded on different occasions, randomly chosen between 2004 and 2009.
3. The audience was often regarded as consisting of already existing friends in "real life". This, as Chandler and Roberts-Young put it, "blindness" to the fact that anyone can partake in what is published on the Internet might derive from the fact that much of the material is produced in one's own private space (the bedroom), which leads to a sense of control.
4. Studies concerning the effect of face-ism versus body-ism show that subjects represented in media images with high facial prominence, regardless of their gender, are rated as more intelligent, ambitious, dominant and assertive by both women and men than are those pictured in more distant shots (Costa & Bitti 2000; Copeland 1989).
5. These breasts derive their shape and appearance not so much from the actual female body as from an imaginary one – reminding us of illustrated American pinups, "Petty Girls" and "Vargas Girls". Large and perfectly rounded with very small nipples, these breasts incarnate an imaginary body while at the same time looking real and authentic.
6. For a more extensive discussion of the different forms of pornography, see Hirdman 2007.
7. Several aspects of authenticity linked to webcam technology derive from its use as "lifecam" streaming video (White 2003). Although the self-portraits are still images, the particular intimacy of the webcam is evident, but deprived of its potential, as White puts it, to exert authority over the viewer's gaze.
8. For example, André Kertész's photo series Distorted Nude 1933.
9. One common explanation is that media imagery affects girls more than boys, because our mediated culture insists on representing the female body as an object for scrutiny, inspection and comparison to an idealized figure (Ward & Caruthers 2001; Rutledge Shields 2002).
10. The integration of more or less overt soft-porn codes linked to aesthetics and lifestyle, in mainstream media, has been referred to as porno-chic (McNair 2002). T-shirts with the logo "porn star", ads in magazines for young women where they can receive their own "porn star name", expressions among young kids to "do porn" (porra sig), which do not refer to having a certain kind of sex, or to have it publicly, but to wear certain clothes and use certain movements and so on, are commonplace. Pornography is no longer limited to sexual activity or to questions of sexual arousal. It operates on a more semantic level as well, a pornographic staging of the body, or rather that of a particular female body.

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