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"Teenagers Get Undressed on the Internet"

Young People's Exposure of Bodies in a Swedish Internet Community

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Abstract

During recent years, Swedish media have paid attention to young people's presentations of self in Internet communities, claiming that these presentations are often sexually provocative. The present study aims at investigating young men's and women's presentations of self in Sweden's largest Internet community, focusing specifically on how bodies are displayed. This is done through quantitative and qualitative content analyses of the photos of 88 users. Results show differences in what parts of their bodies the young men and women show: women tend to focus on faces, while men focus on torsos. Results also contradict the image depicted by the media, as very few photos in the sample can be described as provocative. One explanation offered here concerns the specific Internet community's lack of anonymity, meaning that the interaction is steered by the same mechanisms and social pressures at work in offline environments.

Keywords: Internet culture, online communities, presentation of self, bodies, youth, gender

Introduction

During the past few decades, the number of Internet users has steadily increased, although to different extents in various parts of the world and for various segments of the populations. In some countries, governments were quick to see the potential benefits of information technology and offered incentives to increase computer literacy among the citizenry, to get people to use computers and to provide them with Internet access. Partly due to such incentives, a very large proportion of the Swedish population has become Internet users. Of all Swedish citizens aged 9-79, 80% have Internet access at home. The figures are even higher for young people: among all Swedes aged 15-19, as much as 93% have Internet access at home, and 84% of all 15- to 24-year-olds use the Internet on an average day (Nordicom 2007).

With the increasing number of users, meeting places on the Internet too have become more popular and widespread, meeting places that attract especially young people. On an average day, 62% and 53% of all Swedes aged 9-14 and 15-19, respectively, take part in discussion/chat groups. The gap to other age groups is enormous: only 9% of 25- to 44-year-olds, 4% of 45- to 64-year-olds, and 0% of 65- to 79-year-olds use such arenas daily (Nordicom 2007).

One of the most popular Swedish online meeting places is the community portal Lunarstorm.[1] The largest group of users is found among the 15- to 20-year-olds, of whom 85% visit Lunarstorm at least once a week, and 29% every day. This makes Lunarstorm the most visited website among all Scandinavian countries, and it is also the website where young Swedes spend most time – on average 45 minutes a day.[2]

Young people's use of online meeting places implies that adults' (e.g., parents and teachers) means of gaining insight into and controlling what young people do during their leisure time may decrease. This, in turn, has often led to moral panics (Cohen 1972). During recent years, Swedish media have paid attention to youngsters' activities on Lunarstorm. It has been claimed, for example, that girls and young women are contacted in the web community and persuaded to take part in sexual activities and pose in pornographic pictures. This has led to discussions on the way teenage girls present themselves on Lunarstorm. The media have claimed that the presentations of self are often sexually provocative, both as concerns photos and presentations of self in written text (see, e.g., Ahrnstedt 2007; Ekmark 2004; Söderhjelm 2002).

Female sexuality has often been seen as a threat, both to society and to the women themselves (Skeggs 1997). In media accounts of young women's Internet use, female sexuality and agency have rarely even been acknowledged, but instead girls and young women have been depicted as innocent and easily fooled victims who are lured into contact and abused by sly male predators. The media discourse affects public ideas, and as Thiel (2005) noted, many parents and educators also think of Internet use as a potential danger for their girls. The question, however, is how true these media images are. It is true that young women are some times abused and persuaded to do things they do not want to do. However, the point here is that media coverage is quite one-sided. On the whole, it reproduces the image of women as weak and (sexually) passive and of men as strong and (sexually) active. Furthermore, for those with personal experiences of Internet communication and online communities, the image depicted in the media is quite unfamiliar. In general, web communities are not fora in which all inhibitions are dropped and users engage in wild orgies of pornographic exposures of self (unless the forum is explicitly focused on pornography and sexual activities, of course). However, I had no previous experience of the specific web community Lunarstorm, and decided to see what things really looked like there.

This article is part of a research project aimed at studying what purpose Lunarstorm serves in young people's identity work, emphasizing specifically gender identity and sexuality. It focuses on how the body is displayed: Are young people's presentations of self really as sexually provocative as has been claimed by the media? And to the extent that they are – how should this be interpreted?

Presenting the Body Online

Much of the work on online embodiment and disembodiment was done in the early to mid-nineties by authors such as Balsamo (1995, 2000), Hayles (1999), Stone (1991, 1995), and Turkle (1995). At that time, Internet communication was based on written text, the only way to represent physical characteristics being to describe them in words. Researchers sometimes interpreted this as a release from the constraints constituted by our bodies and bodily characteristics (cf. Haraway 2000; Lipton 1996; Stone 1991;

Stone 1995; Turkle 1995). However, even if the body was not immediately visible, it was still present in online communication, and the users discovered strategies to re-invent it. Many conversations focused on finding out and signaling physical properties, such as gender, age, race and looks, suggesting that, despite the rhetoric depicting the Internet as a place where the body would become superfluous, it was still perceived as important (Kendall 1996).

Moreover, when nothing was said explicitly, there were ways to uncover more information about the offline identity of one's conversational partners. The ways in which people act and talk carry information, because the experiences they have gained by being members of certain groups are revealed in their language and interaction styles (Herring 1994; Nakamura 2000). Users also developed a kind of media competency or an intuitive feeling for their online interaction, which let them apprehend whether their conversational partners really were who they claimed to be (Enochsson 2005; Sveningsson 2001). This "intuitive feeling" often consisted of reading cues given in other users' language and interaction styles so as to determine their likely identity. However, such strategies were often based on coarse categorizations and stereotypical images of individuals of various groups in society. If someone acted in a way that was not expected from a person with the claimed background, s/he was commonly assumed to be an impostor. Thus, users' attempts to fish out more information than was given explicitly ended up encouraging stereotypical content in online communication (cf. Kendall 1996; McRae 1996).

Today, the conditions for presenting the body online are different. Increased computer speed and bandwidth allow for the inclusion of photos, sound files and video-clips. However, despite these changes, presentations of self on web pages or in users' personal profiles of social network sites still tend to be quite coarse and rough-cut (boyd 2001). This applies in particular to gender. In her study on an Estonian dating site, Siibak (2006, 2007) found that the 100 men and women who had been given the highest rating points, i.e. whom other users ranked as most interesting or remarkable, tended to follow extremely gender stereotypical patterns. In her study on young people's presentations of self online, Sveningsson Elm (2006, 2007a) reached similar conclusions.

While the media have paid specific attention to the sexualized body online, this issue has also been addressed by researchers. Susanne Knudsen, for example (2007), studied the relationship between free pornography online and young people's use of photographic, partly naked presentations of self online. The sites in focus in her study were the Norwegian 'deiligst.no' and 'hotnot.no', where young people publish photos of themselves to take part in a competition involving scoring the most points for being good looking or "hot". Anja Hirdman (2007) conducted a similar study in the Swedish equivalent 'snyggast.com'. Both studies showed that men's photos tended to show either muscles or faces, while the women's photos more often focused on the (sexualized) body, borrowing aesthetic conventions from pornography and women's magazines, while at the same time differing from these media genres in terms of depicted activities. Gram and Richardt (2006) studied teenage girls' sexualized performances and presentations of self in the Danish community portal Arto. As all these studies show, for women online, a sexy appearance and/or behavior typically results in more attention and higher ranking, and this was also stressed by informants as an important reason for publishing sexualized photos of themselves (Gram & Richardt 2006).

Performing Gender Identity Online

Whenever individuals are in the presence of others, they give performances aimed at making certain impressions on these others – the audience (Goffman 1959/1990). The acting person suppresses some aspects of self, while accentuating others, the latter aspects typically corresponding to norms, conventions and ideals that are embraced in the group to which the actor belongs, or wishes to belong. In all groups, some norms have higher status than others, meaning that certain behaviors, character traits and personal qualities give more 'rewards' than others do, in the form of positive (or lack of negative) responses from the audience.

This is also applicable to gender performances[3], as some kinds of masculinities and femininities are more highly valued and thus result in more positive responses than others do. Here, Robert Connell's concept of *hegemonic masculinity* is a useful one. Hegemonic masculinity is defined as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell 1995: 77). It is the form of masculinity that is most valued in a certain society at a given time. As Fanny Ambjörnsson (2004) notes, because hegemonic masculinity implies men's superior position relative to women, the notion of hegemony is difficult to translate to processes and power relations between women. However, there still exist different kinds of femininity that are valued differently and that hold different positions relative to each other. Inspired by the work of Beverley Skeggs, Ambjörnsson (2004: 29) calls this 'normative femininity'.

But what kinds of performances do young people make in their construction of visual selves online? What kinds of performances are valued and rewarded? And how do they relate to users' offline lives and identities? Several authors (Gram & Richardt 2006; Stern 1999, 2002, 2004; Thiel 2005) claim that online arenas constitute a context in which young women can experiment with roles, and try out different ways of being a woman, and in which they, in some respects, can feel freer to do so than in offline contexts. For example, the female interviewees in Gram and Richard's study (2006) claimed that they undressed more in their photos published online than they would offline. It is also claimed that women show their sexuality more openly online than offline, and adopt the sexual scripts traditionally associated with men (Daneback 2006).

However, there is reason to be skeptical of unduly strong claims that the Internet offers increased freedom to experiment with identity. Not only have opportunities to include bodies into presentations of self changed, but also the way online arenas are used. In the nineties, online arenas were largely used to meet and interact with unknown people, often anonymously or at least pseudonymously. Today, online arenas are mostly used to interact with people users already know from their offline local contexts, meaning that presentations of self generally have to be reasonably consistent with users' offline roles and personalities. As Gram and Richard (2006) acknowledged, at the same time as girls feel they can more freely display sexualized images of themselves, they also feel the need to strike a balance to avoid being categorized as a "whore".

Norms and ideals differ across settings, and the different performances made by the same individual in different contexts, or in front of different audiences, are sometimes inconsistent. Actors therefore try to keep contexts and audiences apart, to spare them-

selves from the embarrassment resulting from conflicting roles. This process is called 'audience segregation' (Goffman 1959/1990).

Method

The present study is part of a research project[4] aimed at investigating young people's gender and identity work on Lunarstorm. The first step consisted of making an overview of users' presentations of self. Here, Lunarstorm's search engine, or 'friend finder', was used. On 'friend finder', users can specify the characteristics of other users they wish to find. To obtain a sample of users, I specified age and gender. This was done for female users 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 years of age, and for male users in the same age groups.[5] The procedure resulted in a sample of 50 users from each age and gender group, i.e., 500 in total.[6]

Through a thematic analysis, an inventory was made of the different characteristics, interests and orientations the 500 users displayed in their personal sites. The themes found were grouped into 20 categories. One of the categories was 'exposure of body', where 88 of the 500 sites emphasized the user's physical body in various ways. These 88 sites – 52 maintained by female and 36 by male users – make up the units of analysis studied here.

There were three criteria for classifying nests as oriented toward exposure of the body. Each site was to meet at least one:

1. Users were classified as exposing their physical bodies if their sites contained 20 or more photos of the user. 47 users met this criterion: 31 young women and 16 young men.

2. Users could also be classified as oriented toward exposure of the body if they included photographs showing a clear consciousness of the camera, i.e., posing in front of the camera. 52 users met this criterion: 29 young women and 23 young men.

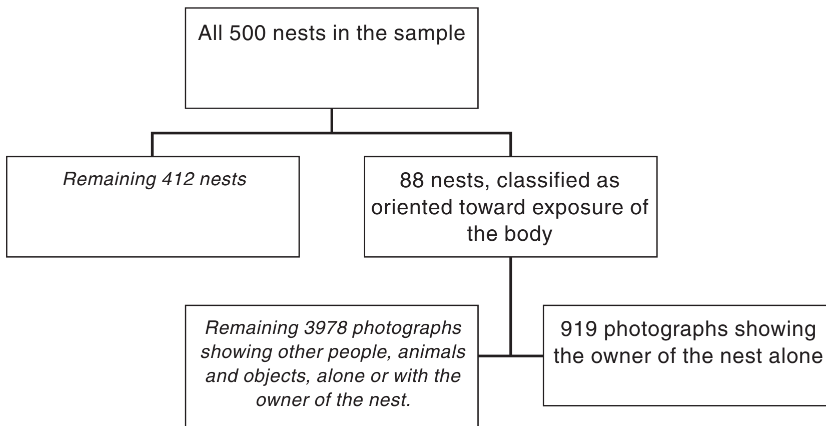
3. Users displaying photographs of body art (i.e., tattoos and piercings) also fell into this category. This criterion was met by 48 users: 32 young women and 16 young men.

These three themes were grouped into one category. In some cases, the themes overlapped, i.e., some users may have published more than 20 photographs of themselves *and* included photos of tattoos. Thus it follows that the total sum of all occurrences meeting the three criteria (47+52+48=147) is larger than the number of nests in the overarching category "exposure of physical body" (88).

Of all 4897 photos contained in the 88 nests, only those that showed the "owner" of the site alone were included in the analysis. Photos of other persons, animals and objects, and photographs depicting the owner together with animals or other persons, were excluded. I also excluded photos that were not publicly accessible. This resulted in a body of 919 photos (see Figure 1).

In the first step, an overview was made of the different kinds of photographs published. An initial classification was made based on the *composition* of the photographs: facial, half-length, full-length and close-up. An inventory was made of the number of photographs belonging to each of these categories and of who published them. An in-

Figure 1. *Units of Analysis*



ventory was also made of how many of the 919 photos could be described as sexually provocative and of who showed what. What should be included in the term ”provocative” can be discussed, as I will do toward the end of this paper. For the present, however, I define provocative photos as “photos that due to minimal dressing (or lack thereof) reveal a great deal of skin”. Finally, the context of the photographs is discussed: In what different places and situations were photos taken, and how does this influence our interpretations?

Some reservations need to be made with regard to the sampling procedure. To start with, the first sample of the 500 users was not randomly chosen, but taken from lists provided by the ‘friend finder’. The ‘friend finder’ displays the 50 users with the most status points in each chosen group. Status points are given for a number of reasons, according to how active the users are and how much they contribute to the community. Thus, these are systematic characteristic of the users in the sample. A sample consisting of only very active users could be considered a problem. One tendency in Internet research has been to study only interactions and individuals that are visible for the researcher, while passive members, who only read material without notifying others, are often neglected. This may give a misleading picture of what Internet communication and communities are typically like, depicting online communities as more cohesive and as having more feelings of community than may be the case for the majority of users (Sveningsson, Lövheim & Bergqvist 2003). However, in the study at hand, I judged this bias not to be very serious. After all, my intention was to find active users, although not necessarily *the* most active ones.

Another bias lies in the sub-sample in focus here: The analyzed photos belong to users who were found to be more focused on their bodies than were the rest of the 500 users. Thus, the ways of presenting oneself that emerge here may be specific to the more “body focused” users, who may be more confident about their looks than the average user is. Thus, no generalizations can be made to all users of the community or to other online communities. However, generalization was never my intention. I instead wished to focus on how the body is presented by young people who display their bodies on Lunarstorm.

A final disclaimer concerns the kinds of knowledge we can acquire through different research methods. While quantitative analyses can give us an overview of the whole picture, and answer questions such as "who publishes what kind of photos, and how many?", they do not allow us to analyze the photos at a deeper level. Quantitative analyses also have little to say about users' thoughts, experiences and their motivations for publishing pictures of themselves. In order to answer such questions, additional qualitative features are also needed. Thus, to get to know something about users' own views of their presentation of self on Lunarstorm, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 users taken from the set of 88: 2 male users 16 and 20 years, and 3 female users 15, 16 and 18 years. The interviews were conducted using MSN and lasted for approximately one hour each. The interviews were analyzed thematically. In the present article, the interviews are used as a complement, the main focus being on the quantitative data.

Results

The 88 sites classified as oriented toward exposure of the body correspond to 17% of all 500 users in the first sample. Although the difference was not significant, the young women were in the majority: 20.8% of the young women compared to 14.4% of the young men belonged to the category, the gender distribution being 59/41. The young women also published more photos ($p<0.05$): 547 (60%) of the photos in the sample compared to the 372 photos (40%) published by the young men. Thus, the media seem to have been right insofar as a number of Lunarstorm users actually do expose their physical bodies online and insofar as young women are over-represented in this group. But how, then, are bodies displayed? Let us take a closer look at what kind of exposures are made in the material, how and by whom.

Composition of Photos

Table 1. *Composition of Photos*

	Percentage of men within category	Percentage of women within category	Level of significance
Full-length pictures	20.0%	26.7%	–
Half-length pictures	65.7%	55.6%	–
Facial pictures	60.0%	86.7%	$p<0.01$
Body art	44.4%	61.5%	–
Other close-ups	40.0%	46.7%	–

The least common composition of photos found in the material is full-length pictures, showing users' whole bodies. There are 47 such photos, corresponding to 5.8 and 4% of all photos in the two groups, being published by 20% of the young men and 26.7% of the young women within the category. Thus, relatively few of both the young women and the young men display their whole bodies, but rather they choose to highlight parts of them.

The second largest category is half-length pictures, showing the body down to the hips. Such pictures account for 24% (or 221) of the photos. More young men than women publish half-length photos: 65.7% of the young men compared to 55.6% of the young

women. The young men also have a larger number of pictures in this category than the young women do: 30.6% of the young men' photos are half-length while the corresponding figure for the young women is 19.5%. Thus, we can see a tendency here, suggesting that half-length pictures are more common among men than among women.

The photos that occur most frequently are facial pictures, showing the face and the neck down to the shoulders. Such pictures account for 59.3% (or 545) of the photos. Thus, in a majority of the cases, the exposure of physical aspects focuses on the face. More young women than young men publish facial pictures: 86.7% of the young women, compared to 60% of the young men within the category ($p<0.01$). The young women also have a larger number of facial pictures than the young men do: 63.8% (or 349) of the young women's photos are facial pictures, while the corresponding figure for the young men is 52.6% (or 196).

The difference in number of facial pictures suggests that the young women may be thinking of the face as more central and more important to display than do the young men. One interpretation is that users may be conforming to ideals of beauty, and what is experienced as attractive in men and women, respectively. For men, good looks may be thought of as a fit upper body, while good looks in women may be focused on the face. Another interpretation is that the young people in the sample are seeking to display an image of proper masculinity vs. femininity. The ideal and stereotypical woman is often described as beautiful, gentle and passive, whereas the ideal and stereotypical man is described as courageous, strong, and active (Svahn 1999). One important ideal of masculinity thus lies in physical strength, which may be what the young men are attempting to show in their half-length pictures. However, together with the young men's higher proportion of half-length pictures, the young women's higher proportion of facial pictures can also be interpreted as showing that young women feel less comfortable than young men do about showing parts of their bodies other than the face. This may be either because they fear being classified as "bad" girls (cf. Ambjörnsson 2004; Bäckman 2002; Merskin 2005 on this balancing act), or simply because they do not wish to be stared at by occasional visitors. It may also be seen as a response to the kind of media content referred to in the present introduction, in which it is routinely claimed that child molesters and pornographers use Lunarstorm and other Internet communities to make contact with children and young people.

Apart from pictures showing the whole body, the torso, or just the face, there are also photos showing only fragments, or close-ups of parts of the body (11.5%, or 106 of the photos). This category also includes all occasions of body art, such as tattoos and piercings.[7] As many as 48 of the users in the sample displayed photos of their tattoos and piercings, and somewhat surprisingly, more young women than men did so: 61.5% of the young women compared to 44.4% of the young men. Although the sample is too small for the difference to be significant, we still see a trend that may indicate a change in attitudes and practices. Body art, like tattoos and piercings, has traditionally been thought of as a masculine way of decorating the body. For a long time, wearing a tattoo was even seen as the ultimate transgression for a woman (Mifflin 1997: ii). As Sweetman (1999) noted, however, during recent decades, body art has gained popularity among an ever wider audience, and thus, the popular image of the tattooed person as being working class and male is becoming increasingly outdated. In the studied material, it seems to be not only accepted for women to have tattoos and piercings, but body art as an aesthetic practice

seems to be embraced by both men and women (cf. Hernwall & Lundmark 2006; Mifflin 1997). However, the material showed what would seem to be important differences in the type and size of body art preferred by men and women, respectively.

Thirty-five users – 46.7% of the young women and 40% of the young men in the sample – published photos of body parts. The single body parts most often exposed are eyes, lips, bellies, chests and buttocks. Bellies and chests are typically displayed undressed, or dressed in tight-fitting clothes. It is typically young women who display their bellies, often with a pierced navel. It is uncertain whether it is the piercing or the flat tummy the user wishes to display – or both. Buttocks are typically shown by young men, dressed in jeans. The fact that it is above all young men who display their buttocks may add an interesting dimension to the image of the otherwise quite heteronormative character of Lunarstorm (see Sveningsson Elm 2007b). However, the jeans often have designer labels, and thus the purpose of exposure may just as well be to show the brand name as to show one's behind. Chests are generally displayed by young men with muscular bodies, as are torsos. Interestingly, most of the pictures showing muscular upper bodies have been edited by users so as not to show the heads of the portrayed persons. What we see here may be an example of men appearing as objects, just as it has often been claimed women are portrayed (Mulvey 1975). Alternatively, users may be engaging in body-mind dualism, such that the physical body is seen as separate from the thinking mind. Photos of lips and eyes are published by both groups, although they seem to be slightly more frequent among young women than among young men.

The practice of highlighting certain body parts is not new. I recall myself as a teenager, drawing pictures of isolated lips and eyes on my student calendars and schoolbooks. But what is it that causes young people to depict these body parts in particular and not others? Apart from showing one's better sides, are body parts used to express something else? Especially lips and eyes could lend themselves to such interpretations. In the studied material, the lips never smile, but are always serious. Nor do the eyes look happy, but rather seem to express melancholy, thoughtfulness, sadness or even pain. One interpretation is that these body parts are depicted as expressing feelings that may be too complicated or too sensitive to express in words. Close-ups of body parts such as lips and eyes often figure as aesthetic conventions in comic strips, notably those targeting young females. In such contexts, they are often used to designate feelings of sadness (eyes with tears) or desire (pouting lips). However, close-ups of body parts also figure in other genres, such as fashion photography (or pornography). In fashion photography, the significance of lips and eyes may not be as symbols that stand for something else; instead, it may be the visual surface that is interesting. Here, body parts become part of an aesthetic whole, whose purpose is to make use of models, angles and light to create a beautiful photo, not unlike a still life in art.

Provocative Photos?

Media coverage has pointed to the prevalence of sexually provocative photos on Lunarstorm. However, few pictures in the examined material could be described as provocative, in the sense of showing skin. Of the 919 photos, 60% were facial pictures, exposing at most some occasional bare shoulders. Of the remaining photos, only a small number show any skin at all. The 919 photos included 14 bare bellies. In all of these cases, the

exposure of skin is about 3 inches, typically displaying a girl's pierced navel. There were 48 tight-fitting and/or low-cut tank tops among the young women's photos, and 21 photos of young men stripped to the waist. The latter expose bare torsos, in all but one case showing well-defined pectoral and abdominal muscles. The material included three photos taken on the beach: one in which a young woman is lying on her face, sunbathing in a bikini next to her mother, one in which a young woman in a bikini is making a splash into a swimming pool, and one depicting a young man stripped to the waist with a towel wrapped around his hips. Among all nests classified as oriented toward exposure of the physical body, there was nothing more undressed than this: most of the 919 photos appeared to be very modest.[8]

Having stated that the provocative pictures in the material were few, one can naturally discuss what is to be considered provocative or (too) sexy. It is not always the picture showing the most skin that is the most provocative or exciting, but the context must be taken into consideration. In the studied material, photos showing only the face were often more sensual than those showing cleavages or bare bellies. With no skin actually being exposed, users seem to feel free to play with media genres such as pornography. This evokes questions of what sexiness actually entails and what is really the most provocative: Is it the photo of an undressed but innocent-looking young woman, or the photo of a fully dressed young woman with a provocative pose and gaze? And what should be considered provocative for boys and young men? The media discourse on young people's presentations of self on Lunarstorm has consistently focused on the exposure and vulnerability of young women, while almost nothing has been said about the ways in which boys and young men present themselves, and to what extent they too can be exposed to the gazes and desires of adult observers. Naturally, what is considered sexy is both culturally and contextually dependent, and there are also strong heteronormative patterns in our desires and conventions with respect to what is considered sexy (see, e.g., Liljeström 1990: 19, my translation, who states the institutionalized heterosexuality to be "an ideological-political system of social relationships, within which male dominance and female submission are institutionalized, sexualized and naturalized").

Few photos in the material showed both skin and a provocative expression. The images I found the most provocative were two half-length photos, one of a young man stripped to the waist, and one of a young woman wearing a miniskirt and a partly unbuttoned blouse. What made me interpret these photos as provocative was the fact that the young man looks as if he is caressing himself, and the young woman seems to be undressing, while looking steadily into the camera, meeting the observer's gaze. Hence, it may be somewhere in the encounter between the depicted person and the observer that provocation lies, or it may lie in actions rather than in looks.

Context of Photos

Photos that in some contexts appear provocative can in other contexts appear innocent, and vice versa (Månsson & Söderlind 2003). Hence, it is crucial to take the context into account: the external context, described as the frame surrounding the picture, and the internal context, described as what can be observed within the picture.

The external context of the studied photos may be the composition and graphic design of the sites surrounding the photos, and what Internet arenas the sites appear in. Espe-

cially the young women's sites say something about the way they position themselves: In most cases, the designs have soft colors and include elements such as hearts, flowers and poems about love and friendship. The overall connotations are romantic rather than erotic, even, or perhaps especially, those that show a great deal of skin: Most of the young women who expose skin also emphasize their steady romantic relationships. I interpret this as a way to counterbalance the exposure of physical or sexual attractiveness with respectability, so as to fit into the ideals of normative femininity – to balance between the undesired polarities of the attractive but too available "whore," on the one hand, and the unattractive, unwomanly woman, on the other (Ambjörnsson 2004; Skeggs 1997; Svahn 1999).

The internal context is what can be observed within the picture. Here, I have chosen to focus on where the photos are taken and by whom. Most of the photos are taken in homelike environments. This can have several possible connotations. On the one hand, the photos appear cozy and informal, and looking at the pictures may feel like being invited into the homes and everyday lives of the portrayed persons. On the other hand, the very same characteristics may evoke voyeuristic connotations. Here, especially in the photos where the portrayed persons take more provocative poses, the homelike environment constitutes a contrast that may be experienced as titillating, and as appealing to erotic fantasies of the girl next door (cf. Paasonen 2007). Photos may also be taken at parties, on travels or at proms, or more seldom, in photo studios.

Most of the photos seem to have been taken by friends, or by the users themselves. The fact that the depicted persons are at the same time the depicting persons implies that they are in control of how they present themselves. They can choose what clothes and accessories to wear, and what postures and facial expressions to assume. In the continued process, they control the cropping of the photos, and can edit and rework them. Note that many of the users in this category, especially the girls, seem to have a strong interest in esthetic practices: They attend art-oriented high schools and state that one of their interests is photography. Thus, exposure of the body may not always be a question of using technology to depict and display the body, but rather the other way around: using one's body to create artistic photographs. In many cases, the users in the sample also seem to regard their bodies as artist material – something that lends itself to being worked with: first styled and molded into different shapes, then depicted and then again further manipulated, using software such as Photoshop, and put into new contexts as parts of photo collages. Discussions on the ways in which girls and women figure in the media have often focused on how their bodies are objectified and/or sexualized (cf. Hirdman 2004, 2007). I hold that the creative design of photographs in the material reveals an aspect that has often been neglected: that of girls and women as strong and independent agents, who are the producers of media content and who decide for themselves whether and how to display their bodies (for similar perspectives, see, e.g., Drotner 1991/1996; Göthlund 1997).

Users' Thoughts and Motives

In their analysis of sexualized selves online, Gram and Richardt (2006) stated that the practice of publishing undressed photos of themselves is part of an experimental phase that young women go through for a limited period of time, when they are fairly young.

This is supported by some of my interviewees, who viewed the publishing of naked photos as something that mostly young users or "fjortisar"[9] do:

> *malin:* What do you think people who see the photos think?
>
> *_unbelievable:* I guess most guys think it's sexy (if it's a girl) while girls think it's something fourteen-year-olds would do.
>
> *malin:* Why, that's interesting, you mean fourteen like immature? Why? Is it mostly very young girls who do this or is it the behavior you think is immature?
>
> *_unbelievable:* Yeah, exactly, immature. And I think it's mostly young girls who do it. I feel that if you take photos like that, you shouldn't publish them on lunar, because it feels so immature and they only want attention, and I think they should seek that in other ways instead.

All five interviewed users condemned the practice of publishing partly nude photos of oneself. Interestingly though, they still had published such photos of themselves. When asked why, they gave a range of answers. For example, as suggested above, the reasons may lie in artistic aspirations. Here, the nude photo is regarded as a piece of art, rather than as belonging to the pornographic genre. It may also be placed in other genres of photos, such as pictures of rock stars, the undressed body being part of subcultural esthetic conventions:

> *J-rock:* Yes, I have published photos of me in scanty clothing. But not in a sexual context, in an esthetic one, you see?
>
> *malin:* Yeah, I think so. Who was the intended audience? How did people react? And what was the thought behind them?
>
> *J-rock:* The purpose was that they were so-called "promotion photos" for my band. And we had a specific theme, and we decided that my image would work best if I wore no t-shirt and pants torn to rags. And the photos turned out to be more undressed than we meant.

This suggests that there may be a grammar of various motives for publishing naked photos online, of which some are accepted and others not. This can be compared to motives for lying about one's identity online (cf. Sveningsson 2001, p. 206ff), which was seen as acceptable if done for certain purposes, though not for others. Gram and Richardt were onto something similar here, when they stated that publishing partly nude photos is accepted if it is done for fun, or together with friends. It may also be that the rules for what is acceptable vary with the individual who makes the transgression. Group members with more status may often transgress norms more freely than want-to-be members, who have to adapt to fixed standards of conduct in order to be accepted (cf. Sveningsson 2001). On the other hand, users who stand wholly outside groups and do not wish to become members are freest to transgress norms and conventions, because they have nothing to lose by doing so.

Discussion

The aim of the present article was to discover how young people present their bodies on their personal pages on Lunarstorm. Three aspects stand out as particularly unexpected.

First, photos of body art were more frequently displayed by young women than by young men. Also, although more young women than young men focused on showing their good looks, quite a few examples were found among the young men as well. This may indicate changing attitudes toward body art, style and beauty, but also what is possible to include in notions of hegemonic masculinity and normative femininity.

Second, the young women tended to focus on faces, while the young men focused on torsos. Interpretations were suggested that concern what is seen as good looks in men and women or users working with images of masculinity and femininity. Yet another interpretation is that the girls felt uncomfortable with showing more of their bodies than the face, either for fear of being stared at by strangers, or of being seen as "bad" girls. Being a "bad" girl is clearly not compatible with normative femininity, according to which physical attractiveness must be combined with sexual moderation or 'respectability' in a complicated balancing act (cf. Ambjörnsson 2004; Bäckman 2003; Skeggs 1997; Svahn 1999).

The young women's focus on the face and the young men's focus on the torso contradict the findings of researchers looking at other Internet arenas. In both Knudsen's (2007) and Hirdman's (2007) research, for example, it is instead men who focus on the face, while women display their (sexualized) bodies. How can these differences be explained? One possible explanation lies in the online environments with their respective goals and target groups. The sites studied by Knudsen and Hirdman, for example, focused on displaying the beautiful body, and notably, the ranking of users as being "hot". In the competition for high scores, women may try to look sexy and men as physically strong as possible, in a caricature of gender characteristics almost reminiscent of drag shows (see also Siibak 2006; 2007). The ideals guiding presentations of self in those arenas seem to connect to some extent to hegemonic masculinity and normative femininity, of which physical strength and sexual attractiveness, respectively, are important parts. However, for both genders, when displays of these ideals are too extreme, or not counterbalanced with other characteristics, the overall performance is responded to negatively. For instance, men who become too muscular are ridiculed (Monaghan 2000), and women who show too much sexual attractiveness are seen as sluts.

Third, the media have routinely claimed that young people expose themselves in an improper and provocative way online. I wonder how these journalists have set about finding the provocative presentations of self they claim to have found, because I for one did not find any. This is both expected and unexpected. Large Internet communities often have a more tolerant view of deviance and transgression of norms than do their smaller counterparts (Sveningsson 2001). Lunarstorm, being a very large Internet community, would fit into that description, suggesting that nude pictures would be more likely to be found there than in an Internet community with fewer members. However, size is probably not the determining factor here, but rather the degree of anonymity the environment allows. Although it is a large community, Lunarstorm is mostly used to hang out with friends and interact with people one already knows from one's life offline (Dunkels 2005; Enochsson 2005). In that way, Lunarstorm is clearly locally anchored.

Given this, the absence of provocative material is not surprising after all. Provocative material is probably more likely to be found in more anonymous arenas, such as those studied by Knudsen (2007) and Hirdman (2007).

Another explanation for the lack of provocative material lies in the fact that Lunarstorm attracts a large and wide audience. Because Lunarstorm is so widespread among youngsters, many parents and teachers register as members too, so they can see what their children are doing. Previous research has indicated the difficulties that users of online arenas may experience in their presentations of self, due to the variety and heterogeneity of their audiences (e.g., boyd 2001; boyd & Heer 2006; Sevick Bortree 2005). In publicly accessible online arenas, this heterogeneity comes with the accessibility of the sites. In arenas that require registered membership, users may not foresee that, for example, employers can enter the same communities and gain access to information about them that was never intended to be spread outside their groups of friends (boyd & Heer 2006).

Lunarstorm users generally seem to be fully aware of the risk that their presentations will be read by unintended audiences. As one of the interviewees said: "If you publish something on the Net, you should be able to blow it up, print it on a t-shirt and show your granny. Otherwise you shouldn't publish it". Because users know that audience segregation is not possible, they tend to form their presentations of self so that they fit into several different contexts. It requires some degree of competence to position oneself in various situations, contexts and groups, and to design a presentation of self that fits into all of them. It is no wonder, therefore, that youngsters sometimes step over the line of what is considered appropriate. However, as has been showed here, this rarely happened. Naturally, one explanation is that provocative material did not occur in my sample due to some form of bias. Perhaps the users in the sample are not people who publish nude photos of themselves, but rather other users do so. Perhaps those with fewer status points, who stand outside groups and communities, are the ones who transgress such norms? Thus, one weakness of the study lies in the sampling procedure, and it would be interesting to see whether studies based on random samples would yield the same findings. I certainly believe that users do publish provocative photos on Lunarstorm. The point is, however, that they do not seem to do so to the extent the media have tried to make us believe.

Notes

1. www.lunarstorm.se
2. www.lunarworks.se, May, 2007.
3. Here, gender is seen as not a cause of, but rather an effect of different sorts of actions (Butler 1990). Enacting and displaying certain properties that are generally associated with one specific gender thus become the means through which gender itself is created.
4. Funded by the Swedish Research Council 2005-2007.
5. Information about age and sex is acquired automatically by Lunarstorm's software in the registration process. For users to appear to be of another sex or age than they actually are, they must provide fake social security numbers.
6. I have the permission of the managers of Lunarstorm to conduct this study. However, I did not seek the informed consent of the 500 users to analyze their sites. Here, I followed the recommendations of the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess & Jones 2003), according to which material from the Internet can be collected and analyzed without informed consent, on condition that the arena that is studied is public, and that the studied material is not sensitive (Sveningsson 2003; Sveningsson, Lövheim, &

Bergquist 2003). All material used in this study is taken from publicly accessible material. Names and other information in the nests that may lead to the identification of users, or people referred to in their nests, have been altered.

7. The two parts in the category, close-ups and body art, were merged into one category. Sometimes they overlapped, so that the number of users in the underlying themes (48+35=83) is higher than the number of users in the whole category (56).
8. In the whole material of totally 500 nests, there were two nude (or almost-nude) pictures, both published by young men and explicitly humorous, but neither of the sites in its entirety was classified as oriented toward exposure of the body.
9. "Fjortis" is a Swedish slang expression for a fourteen-year-old, and refers primarily to behavior associated with young girls.

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