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Duckface/Stoneface

Selfie Stereotypes and Selfie Literacy in Gendered Media Practices in Sweden

Michael Forsman

This article describes how Swedish teens use selfies for gendered self-representation in online peer-to-peer communication. The aim of the article is to critically question and add on to the extensive tradition of studies of large scale mass mediated stereotypes, by looking at how gender selfie stereotypes are produced and performed in social media through the interaction and participation of school children. The article combines constructionist perspectives on representation and gender with social semiotics. Based on empirical data from focus group interviews with student from grade 7 in four Stockholm schools (N=41) the article show that the way the selfie genre is played out and negotiated among teens is marked by gender stereotypes. These stereotypes are used to confirm a dualistic separation of sexes, the subordination of women, and a heteronormative order for sexuality, but also used for “stereotype vitalization” where prevailing gender norms are renegotiated, jested and mocked.

To take, share and comment on selfies (images of oneself, taken by oneself, to be shared on social media) has become a common practice among both celebrities and the public at large. The impact of the selfie format is manifested in the millions of *selfies* (myself in my picture) and *wefies* (me with others in my picture) that continuously are posted on social media web sites such as Instagram.

Some studies suggest that the selfie genre is driven by attention seeking behavior and social conformity, with visual inspiration and individual ideals taken from celebrity culture, commercials and different forms of popular culture (Lobinger & Brantner, 2015; Siibak, 2009, 2013). There has also been some moral indignation and cultural critique directed towards the selfie phenomenon, which has been described as a sign of an individualistic and narcissistic lifestyle and branding, and as a reflection of a consumerist and neoliberal order (e.g., Giroux, 2015). Others have argued that the selfie genre even might have political potential if used for civic or artistic purposes, and there are

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examples of how selfies can be used in alternative and more artistic ways (Kuntsman, 2017), but this article focuses on the more general – mainstream, if you like – use of selfies among teenagers.

From a social psychological perspective, stereotypes can be described as a basic human cognitive and linguistic function, or as “pictures in our head” based on simplification and categorization that help us to handle a myriad of impressions and the ungraspable complexity of social life (Lippman, [1922] 2007; Perkins, 1989). The concept “media stereotype” in turn refers both to static characters in fiction and drama, with a limited set of characteristics, and to recurrent plot structures and aesthetical formulas (e.g., Cawelti, 1976; Dyer, 1993; Schweinitz, 2011).

Studies of stereotypes as textual codes in systems of representation (like genre stereotypes) or as a narrative force have been essential to mass communication research and critical media studies for a long time; Barker (1989) even speaks of “a small industry in its own right” (p. 86). According to this tradition, media stereotypes are linked to commercial standardization, hegemonic culture and negative media effects in combination with lack of artistic originality, critical awareness, and political and aesthetical progression. It is no wonder that the term stereotype almost always is used abusively (Dyer, 1993).

Traditionally, discussions about media stereotypes have concentrated on the technologies and cultural forms of what Marshall (2010) calls “representational media” (i.e. mass media output governed by large-scale commercial organizations and the logic of one-way communication). In this article, I want instead to use selfies to investigate the function and potential of stereotypes in what Marshall calls “presentational media”, where the textual content is performed, that is, produced and exhibited by individuals through the participatory media (boyd, 2014; Jenkins, 2006).

Stereotypes, gender and power are essential not only in relation to media audiences but also to “the tethered self” (Turkle, 2013), who is constantly connected and engaged in personalized networks (Raine & Wellman, 2012). Still, there is a lack of research on the dynamics of gender stereotypes in the circulation of genres like selfies on social media. I approach this void by using data from my study (Forsman, 2014): *Duckface/Stoneface: Social media, gaming and visual communication among boys and girls in grades 4 and 7* (title translated from the Swedish). The title *Duckface/Stoneface* refers to two gender stereotypical poses that I learned about during focus group interviews with students in grade 7 (aged 13-14 years). Duckface is a pose where you show great awareness of the camera. This pose is mainly associated with girls. Stoneface is a pose more associated with boys, which is about looking cool and unaffected by the presence of the camera.

Methodology and perspectives on gender

The report *Duckface/Stoneface* (Forsman, 2014) was the result of a research assignment from the Swedish Media Council in 2013. The Council wanted a qualitative,

gender oriented report on how boys and girls respectively use social media, games and images online to complement their semiannual statistics on children's media use, which over time has shown strongly gender stereotypical results for how 11– 16 year olds use online media. Simply put: boys go into gaming, girls are on social media. The questions to answer were, how can this be understood, and how do the children themselves relate to this?

My study was conducted in the spring of 2013 in four Stockholm schools of different socioeconomic context with the aid of two former students from the Department of Media and Communication Studies at Södertörn University. An essential part of the method was focus group interviews. According to Livingstone & Lunt (1993), focus groups are a good method to trigger conversations about sensitive topics and shared group norms, since the participants can support each other in self-disclosure. Our interview questions concerned habits, use, practices and opinions related to the social media, gaming and visual communication. At the start the study was not especially focused on selfies or gender stereotypes in social media; this came to the fore during the focus group interviews with the grade 7 students. The material used in this article is taken from eleven such interviews (N=41), eight with girls (N=28) and three with boys (N=13).

Most of the interviews were done between or after classes in empty group rooms, comprised 3 to 5 students, and lasted about 60 minutes. All interviews were recorded, to later be transcribed and analyzed thematically. The recruitment to and practical administration of the interviews was done with the help of schoolteachers, with written permission obtained from parents for their child to participate. All interviews were done in accordance with the ethical guidelines given by The Swedish Research Council (VR), which means that the children were informed that their names would be anonymized, that the information in the room was confidential, and that they could leave the interview at any time they wanted.

In line with what Hennessy & Heary ([2005]2011) suggest for focus group interviews with children, we used some “stimulating material” (a sample of selfies, some candy) as well as handed out small “assignments” (like list your favorites) in order to keep the participants interested. We also followed Barbour's (2007) advice to use gender homogenous groups when working with younger children and teenagers, all the time well aware that the interview situation also is a space for gender performance, with pressure to say “the right thing”.

I assumed a constructionist approach based on Butler's (1990) performative theories on gender. This means that embodied selves are not seen as preceding the cultural conventions for how to signify bodies. Or as Butler puts it, “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (p. 25). R.W. Connell's (2002) perspective on children as agents and as active in their appropriation of the dominant heteronormative order was also an important input to my approach, as well as Connell's emphasis on the importance of homosocial peer group control in this process.

Children's manner of using the media can be regarded as a way to actively adopt and confirm (or challenge) the terrain of the prevailing gender order; a structure based on the dichotomization of masculine and feminine, and the subordination of women. This unjust order is something that every new generation have to explore, and change. It can also be seen as a (play)ground for explorative, and undermining activities.

Although the data from my focus group interviews expose some stereotypical patterns, the material can be read against the grain as a form for deconstruction of the prevailing gender order; and here we can turn to Cawelti's (1976, p. 12) concept of "stereotype vitalization", which according to Seiter (1986) alludes to the fact that "uniqueness and individuality can be added onto and performed by the usage of stereotypes" (p. 23).

One stereotype that came up and that influenced the title for the report was "duckface". According to the *Urban Dictionary*, a Duckface is the face you make if you push your lips together in a combination of a pout and a pucker to give the impression that you have more prominent cheekbones and fuller lips. There are many variations of the duckface, and a myriad of online suggestions for "how to take the ultimate selfie". One can also find directives for the "best duckface" in Kim Kardashian's (2015) biography *Selfish*, a book a book entirely based on Kardashian's selfies and wiefes.

Binary visuals

The visual and social norms for the encoding of gender in what Lüders, Proitz & Rasmussen (2010) refer to as "self-publishing genres" (selfies is one example of this) coincides with what many studies of mass media and different popular culture genres previously have shown: males are represented as active and self-important, while women and girls are more defined by their looks and their relation to the "male gaze" (Mulvey, 1989).

This pattern has saturated the general mass media output and directs much imagery on social media. Whereas "He" often depicts himself as somewhat distant and engaged in something else than merely posing for his own camera, "She" selfies are more likely to be centered around what Mulvey (1989) in her seminal work on film and gender structuration calls "to-be-looked-at-ness".

As Table 1 below shows, similar patterns could be registered in my study.

Table 1 is a compilation and thus a simplification. Of course there were data that went against this kind of gender dualistic exposition; still, the model sums up some of the main results, and it can be read in different ways. One can see this table as an illustration of how gender stereotypes prevail and oppress young children and teenagers, and how guilt and self-blame consistently is stitched to (media) practices that are associated with girls. Another reading of it 1 is that it reveals what we can call "selfie literacy", meaning the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create selfies in relation, for example, to dominating representational codes for performing gender, although not necessarily in a critical and unveiling way.

Table 1. Boy selfies and girl selfies

Boys' images	Girls' images
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid selfies • If you post selfies, look cool • Smooth faces are bad • Mirror selfies are good (for showing your 'six pack') • Too much styling gel can make you look gay • Stoneface is good • Don't do duckface • Be natural = look as if you really don't bother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take as many pictures as you like in search of the right one • It's ok to upload many images • Show that you are aware of the camera • Use Instagram filters to improve your images • Look pretty and cheerful • A moderate exposure of skin and cleavage is ok, but not too much • If you do a duckface, be moderate • Be natural = don't use too much make up

Notable is that it is considered desirable among both girls and boys to “act natural”, but that this pose visually is constructed in diametrically different ways. “He” comes across as natural through poses, positions, activities and places that makes him look nonchalant, like “I don't really bother”. Whereas “She” obtains a “natural look” by using filters and by not wearing *too much* make up.

Among the boys that took part in the focus group interviews it was generally important to distance themselves from the selfie phenomenon. Like these two boys do, in focus group F2 consisting of five boys (5B).

D: I almost never upload selfies.

Z: Neither do I. I just check out others'. F2:5B

In interview F5 three boys participated, and here the interviewer (I) learns that if as a 13-year-old boy you post a selfie it is better if your picture appears as depictive and “functional” rather than as smooth and posed. This can also be related to some of the statements that the boys made about selfies as “tiresome” and “unnecessary”, with the indication that selfies are “a girly thing”.

F: I know a girl who posts two or three pictures every day on Instagram. That is kind of tiresome. Every time you scroll down there is a new image of her. By now she has probably posted 500. At least.

L: And a lot of this imagery covers poses from, what should I say, the same sector.

I: This is not something you do?

F: No way!

A: If we post. It's just natural. F5:3B

Interestingly enough, similar forms of negative evaluation and encumbering came up when some of the girls described their media practices using words like “unnecessary” or “addictive”; especially when talking about “other girls”.

Generally, the girls were much more elaborated and willing to describe their “selfie literacy” and the generic distinctions and production values behind their imagery. One example of this was “the twisted selfie” where you look like you’re leaning your head, which helps to make you look “pretty”. Here we learned that there are two main techniques for creating this kind of selfie: either you hold the smartphone camera lopsided or you use an Instagram filter.

R: I can ‘t stand straight. I must be twisted [laughter].

C: It’s more delicate.

R: Otherwise you look stiff like what’s his name, Hitler. *F23:3G*

Impression management

Selfies are part of a strategic and communicative mediation and branding of the self that can be related to what boyd (2008), referring to Goffman ([1959]1990) calls “impression management”, which means that my imagery not only represents “the real me”, but also my ideal ego in combination with how I think others regard me, and how I would like them to perceive me.

There is a strong awareness of both one’s actual audience (close friends) and one’s “imagined audience” (other followers) (Oolo & Siibak, 2013), and there is a strong surveillance among peers and in one’s individualized network that guides what is considered as socially acceptable or not in selfies. The limitations of what is socially acceptable for selfies among young users of social media is illustrated in Table 2, which is a list over some of the semiotic and social directives that Siibak (2009, 2013) has found among young Estonians.

Table 2. Norms for socially acceptable selfies

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Make sure your pictures resemble professional imagery and visual standards associated with celebrities - Make sure your pictures harmonize with the stylistic norms of your online network - Only post what you think will make others find you attractive - Only post selfies that make you look good, preferably better than others - Make sure your images connote an interesting and groovy life
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Similar findings have been made by Albury (2015) and Lobinger & Brantner (2015) in studies that also reveal the importance of appearing as an authentic and profiled

personality, but always without “being too much”. During our focus group interviews it became clear that girls were almost painfully and ostensibly aware of these regulations.

A: When girls post pictures where they are, like, half naked it will turn into the worst biggest thing ever. But when guys post themselves in just their underpants, no one says anything.

R: That’s true. For example, if I see a girl that, like, posted a picture of herself in just underpants and a bra then it’s like, what a bitch! Then when a guy posts the same thing, that is somehow better. *F23:3G*

Obviously “girl-selfies” and “boy-selfies” are audited and estimated according to different value scales, as in this example, where the three boys in F5:3B comment on some selfies with girls that we brought to the interview. Their comments are made almost in sport commentary manner.

A: Some duckface there it seems.

L: And a lot of makeup.

F: Mm, there are some poses that are really popular among girls.

A: Like when they turn around and take a selfie in the mirror so they both can show their face *and* flash their ass [demonstrates the pose]. *F5:3B*

In all the interviews there was talk about duckface. It seemed to be a given possibility and part of their repertoire of selfie poses to most of the girls, while none of the boys admitted to even having tried to pull a duckface. Generally, duckface was used as a pejorative term for a stereotype especially tied to girls that were judged as “too extreme”.

Duckface also came up in affiliation with another stereotype, namely “*fjortis*”. This in Swedish teenage lingo alludes to a person aged about fourteen, but is mainly used as a degrading remark about someone who is trying to look older than they actually are by wearing (a lot of) makeup together with clothes and props that signal partying, consumption, and attitudes and behavior associated with people above their actual age group. Some years ago, there was a something that could be described as a “*fjortis* subculture”. This was based on exaggeration, superficiality, hedonism and consumption. Since then the use value of the term seems to have diminished (although there still are Facebook groups like *We who hate Fjortisar* or *R.I.P Fjortis*). Even so this stereotype came up in our interviews.

Here *fjortis* was used as a negative term and almost solely in connection with girls regarded as too exhibitionistic or “too sexual”.

I: Do you still say *fjortis*?

A: No, now it’s ”*orre*”*

N: It’s a word for those looking for a lot of attention

I: *Aha, and what does an orre do then?*

N: Like rolling themselves in the snow in their underwear...to get likes on Facebook *F19:G3*

* Orre originates from the turkish word *orospu* and means vulgar, bitch, slut.

Stereotype vitalization

A stereotype fixates and separates what in real life is something much more fluid (like gender); or as Dyer (1993) puts it: "stereotypes do not only, in concert with social types, map out the boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behavior, they also insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none" (p. 16). Probably, the selfie format and different gender poses can be regarded as one area that children and adolescents use to orient themselves by constructing dualism, difference and change.

Often stereotypes are associated with a dumbing down process driven by standardized and repetitive generic formulas, and popular mythologies and ideological patterns that distort, simplify and misrepresent gender, class, race, age, etc. This conserving effect of media stereotypes has been thoroughly discussed (Hall, 1997; Ross & Lester, 2011). Still, uniqueness, individuality, humor and reflexivity can be added onto some stereotypes, and this "stereotype vitalization" (Cawelti 1976, p. 11) opens up to new forms of projections.

Several examples of what could be called "stereotype vitalization" came up during our interviews, especially with the girls. One was the difference made between serious and unserious selfies. We learned that when you take a "serious selfie" your ambition is to look natural. As we saw in Table 1, "natural" is constructed by not wearing too much make up and not doing any duckface, whereas the "unserious selfie" more often is taken together with a friend, for example during a selfie session where you almost laugh your brains out together. For girls to look "silly" or "ugly" can be a way to mock and undermine the visual order of how to look "pretty", according to structuration principles that can be understood through the concept of "the male gaze".

There seems to be empowering and deconstructing potential also in relation to the maybe strongest selfie stereotype of them all, the Duckface. Often this pose and its visual codification is associated with stupidity, but a duckface can also be used to signify friendliness. This is an important aspect of all selfie stereotypes, that the imagery should not only be read as visual representations, but should also be related to different media practices (Couldry, 2012) such as posting, sharing, commenting, etc., and to the fact that the visual meaning changes depending on when, how, by who and to whom the image is shared and commented on within ones individualized network (cf. Kress, 2010).

Selfies are often compared to self-portraits, but the question is whether this analogy is accurate. A self-portrait is a single image meant to be self-sufficient and something more permanent. Selfies are snapshots taken at "an arm lengths distance" with crude and depictive rather than artistic or innovative imagery (Frosh, 2015). The selfie is ephemeral, replaceable, easily discarded and made for instant circulation (Hess, 2015).

According to Retterberg (2014) this genre should not even be discussed in terms of single images, being much more based on quantities and cumulative social logics. Even the word selfie (a diminutive) indicates something provisional and ongoing (Rutledge, 2013). This is just a version of me, for the time being. Thus, selfies should be seen as part of an ongoing identity process (Drotner, 2008) where I am "writing myself into being" through my online activities (Sundén, 2003).

Discussion

Many of the norms that came up in my study reflect the principles of a gender system based on a dualistic separation of the sexes, the subordination of women, and a heteronormative order of sexuality. This system is prevailing and reenacted, but is not fixed. Rather, it could be described as a moving equilibrium. Thus, selfies and other online personal media genres used for self-presentation can be regarded as a terrain where children are audited and commented on by their peers as they together explore how to "do gender". In this process some dominating gender stereotypes will be confirmed, while others are renegotiated, jested or mocked.

Within the context of media education and media literacy work media stereotypes often are regarded as something evil that children should be vaccinated against, and as something that society ultimately can be liberated from. It is not unlikely that this is something of an illusion. It might be more fruitful to regard selfie stereotypes as a semiotic material and social practice that can be used as a starting point for reflection concerning systematic gender inequalities in media pedagogical work, where it is important not to condemn what children do in their daily media practices and online life. For it surely is better as a pedagogue to be perceptive of the children's skills, terminology and meaning formations.

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