

Today's outfit in Swedish Fashion Weblogs: An ethnographical study of the online body

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ABSTRACT

In a Swedish context blogs, featuring young women and men posting their self-portraits taken with digital cameras have become increasingly common. These photos are often categorized as Today's Outfit. The empirical material for this study consists of both blogs and of interviews with some of the bloggers. In this paper I will ask how the body is staged in these blogs. I will begin this exploration by looking at how these kinds of blogs can be categorized and also on the current debate about fashion blogs in Swedish media and blogosphere; next I will discuss today's outfit as a self-portrait and later look at what differences and similarities can mean in this context.

Keywords

Self-portrait, weblog, Sweden, performance

INTRODUCTION

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

This paper is an interpretation of closely examined social discourse [7]; with other words the approach is ethnographic. As a framework for the examination I will look at Swedish fashion blogs and more closely on the self and body as a performance connected to identity. The empirical material consists of both blogs and of interviews with some of the bloggers.

In this paper I will explore the similarities and differences in posing for the today's outfit. Could we talk about a community and/or a networked identity? How is the body

staged in fashion blogs? I will begin this exploration by looking at how a fashion blog can be categorized and also on the current debate about fashion blogs in Swedish media and blogosphere; next I will discuss today's outfits as a self-portrait and later look at what differences and similarities can mean in this context.

"My blog is a mix of clothes, photos and thoughts. Current events and some music tips may also exist in my blog. My blog is simply me. I don't want to categorize my blog as a fashion blog, photo blog, or something alike, it is a mix of everything. Neither do I want to place my self in a certain box and say that this is me since I change and grow all the time."

When asked to describe her blog in her own words, the blogger cited she mention her identity in correlation to her blog. She both state that her blog is simply her and that she do not want to place her self (nor her blog) in a certain box. The reason why I interviewed her is that she publishes self-portraits and photos of her self posing in "today's outfit".

THE BEING OR NONBEING OF A FASHION BLOG

When I started my study about fashion blogs my definition of a fashion blog was the following: a fashion blog is a blog where a person writes about fashion in a personal way. I later narrowed my research area to fashion blogs that included pictures of the blog owner and blogs written in Swedish. Regarding the blogosphere in Sweden Jan Kullin [15] did a quantitative study of the Swedish bloggers. According to the study 53% of the female blog readers wanted to read about fashion and design, while the same category did not occur among male readers. Trying to establish how many Swedish blogs about fashion exist would be an impossible task, certain is that they have increased a lot the last years. There exist very few male bloggers that post today's outfits. Most of the male bloggers who write about fashion are working on fashion newspapers and do not post pictures of them selves.



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During 2007 the Swedish evening paper Aftonbladet arranged a competition for the best Swedish fashion blog. Aftonbladet decided that the top 25 bloggers (under the category fashion and design) on the blog list Bloggportalen would be nominated and that the readers of the paper were to vote for one of these blogs. The contesting blogs should be private, meaning not having a commercial partner and the majority of the blog posts since the last two months should be about fashion.

Bloggportalen consisted of 31218 blogs in the beginning of July 2008 and of them 5389 were under the category for fashion and design. Subcategories are (in order of rank) general fashion (3863), women's fashion (3226), general and other (2587), things (2289), home furnishing (1337), perfume (1326), men's fashion (957), graphic design (709), current events (664), fashion and companies (654), design and companies (632), web design (581), architecture (370) and journalists (328). The winner of the contest during 2007 was Engla's showroom with 44,4% of the votes. Engla writes that her blog is called a showroom since it shows the best parts of her life. The motto of the blog is "Fashion fades. Style is eternal".

I choose to ask both the nominated bloggers of the contest and a number of bloggers randomly found by searching with the words modeblogg (in English fashion blog) and dagens outfit (in English today's outfit) for an interview through e-mail. An interesting thing during the contact with the bloggers was that one of the competitions' finalists declined an interview since she did not want to call her blog a fashion blog. It turned out that most of the bloggers did not want to call their blog a fashion blog. As the blogger quoted in the beginning of the paper another one of the finalists said something similar:

A fashion blog is a blog that only consist of fashion and where the blogger follows fashion trends regardless if beautiful or not. I wouldn't say that my blog is a fashion blog, rather a blog about me – a mix of different kind of blogs. I wouldn't want to categorize my blog either way.

It seems like blogging about fashion is something embarrassing and it is also admitted to be embarrassing by one of the interviewed bloggers:

In the beginning I didn't call my blog a fashion blog, since I don't know that much about fashion and wrote about other stuff too. I see my blog as an inspirational blog, but I sometimes somewhat embarrassed call it a fashion blog, only because it is easier that way.

One of the reasons for this may be the criticism of fashion blogs in Swedish media and blogosphere the past year and the publicity the blogs have received. The blogger Legally Blond [10] reflects on what happened when she decided not to write about fashion, make up and celebrities anymore in her blog:

I remember when I wrote a lot about fashion, makeup and celebrities on my blog. Once I was in third place on Bloggtoppen. [...] I received a considerable amount of invitations to different fashion events and a lot of advertises like "Write about these clothes! Mention our jewelry on your blog!". Easy topics and a lot of pictures generated more visitors – a huge group of younger teenage girls what attempted to build an identity with superficial means. [...] Since I almost completely stopped writing about fashion and publishing pictures from web shops about 2000 of my unique visitors disappeared. It is crazy. It is totally insane. But it is also interesting. How cool it is, when you come to think of it. A person is less worth reading (or maybe less worth seeing) if the surface disappears. (the 30th of July 2007, <http://www.idis.blogg.se>)

The things that have been criticized in Swedish media and the Swedish blogosphere regarding fashion blogs are their credibility, suspicions about hidden advertisements for of clothes and products and the fact that there exist young Swedish teenage girls running their blog as a business and make profit from it. In March 2008 The Swedish Consumer Agency started an investigation to elucidate if some of the fashion bloggers break the marketing law by writing about products without stating that they receive payment from companies in doing so. Among other bloggers the fashion blogs have been criticized for being superficial, mainstream and narrow-minded.

Even if it seems like most of the blogs I have chosen to analyze are not true fashions blogs according to the bloggers themselves I have chosen to still call them fashion blogs. They could also be called personal blogs that sometimes cover fashion, but since I concentrate on the today's outfits, I have chosen to not use the loose term personal blog. I also want to state that there are extremely few blogs in Sweden that only write about fashion.

TO SHOW YOUR OUTFIT – TO SHOW YOURSELF

A photograph labeled "today's outfit" can be categorized as a self-portrait, as can a blog. In the pictures of today's outfit the body and clothes are prominent. Since the body is always more or less visible and instantly available, the body is very important in visual communication. Our body can be seen as a surface of projection of our identity.

Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin [2] have stated that we see ourselves today in and through our available media. This is not to say that our identity is not fully determined by media, but rather that we employ media as a vehicle for defining both personal and cultural identity. As these media become simultaneously technical analogs and social expressions of our identity, we become simultaneously both the subject and the objects of contemporary media. Furthermore Bolter and Grusin state that new media offer new opportunities for self-definition, which fashion blogs can be seen as a form of. I base the analysis about identity on theories about seeing the identity as socially and culturally constructed. One way to see identity is to see it

as something essential in the individual, as something that exists without a physical location. Another way is to see identity as a series of repetitions of identical acts. The former way lie on a metaphysic base and the latter is of a performative base. I think that we mostly have to see identity as socially constructed and therefore performative (compare for example with [21] and [12]). The individual's self is constructed through the performances that he/she does in the social life.

Jill Walker [20] has written a paper on the digital aestheticisation of oneself where she explores what kind of self-portraits we are seeing. Walker asks what our digital desire to aestheticise ourselves might mean. Walker's study has many similarities with mine as Walker studies self-portraits published on the Internet. One of the self-portrait projects Walker looks closer at is the Mirror Project (mirrorproject.com). Heather Champ, the coordinator for the project has stated in an interview that self-portraits capture us differently from portraits taken of us by others and that we are less likely to put on a happy face [16].

While I noticed that several of the bloggers did not show their face in the pictures even if they posted pictures of themselves, I also noticed that several did not smile or look in to the camera. Some other typical characteristics of the pictures can also be seen, but before I look further into the different characteristics I will briefly discuss the blogger as an object or as a subject when it comes to today's outfits. As Walker [20] states, to be photographed is to be objectified and to photograph is to be a subject with the right to define the world. I asked the bloggers if they take their pictures by themselves or if they have a friend helping. One of the bloggers answered:

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

Most of the other bloggers said as well that they take the pictures themselves, only one mentioned that her sister sometimes take the pictures of her. As it seemed like most of the bloggers did not want to call their blog a fashion blog because they felt that a fashion blog was something to be ashamed of, the quote above show that it seems like asking someone to take a picture of one self could also be something to be ashamed of. One of the bloggers stated that she wanted pictures of herself since it created a closer relationship to her readers. Since they are taking self-portraits they are both objectified and a subject. I would argue that while they create pictures of themselves they try to mediate exterior images that correspond with the inner image that they carry. Similar conclusions have been

drawn by Anette Göthlund in her study about self images of teenage girls and the connection to esthetics and identity. The girls give their dreams and thoughts about themselves an exterior shape [9]. The staging and posing can be seen as performative. Performative in the way Judith Butler [3] write:

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

I would argue that the bloggers stage identities instead of a singular identity. We have an inner subjective identity – a unique feeling of being me. Besides that we have an exterior objective identity – our physical measurable characteristics and furthermore a layer in between – our intersubjective or shared identities. Shared identities are about our sociocultural positions, videlicet about how we are characterized by others and/or with the images we identify ourselves with, according to [6]. This is something very clear when one studies young people. They can show a strong inner motivation to change themselves [9]. There are different spheres where the different identities are constructed and sometimes melted together. The blog is part of the blogger's everyday life and the blog can be seen as one sphere where they can try out different strategies and identities. In the blog the above mentioned identities can melt together into a today's outfit picture.

The way a mirror is used to try out different outfits or facial expressions in the private room, the blog can be seen as a more public mirror. All of the bloggers interviewed said that they take a lot of pictures, in fact as many as needed to get pictures that they are comfortable with. Walker [20] state that we are not simply interested in presenting an image, we are creating versions of ourselves. Thomas [19] who has studied avatars online, has concluded that the screen offers both a safe and private place to explore their fantasies, yet with an audience that can make judgments about their performances of femininity. This can also be applied to today's outfits. Though, it seems like the male bloggers seldom receive comments on their outfits, female bloggers can receive up to 120 comments on one of their outfits. Engla, who were voted the best fashion blogger during 2007, express her depreciation of some of the comments she receive:

"Do you know what? I'm totally angry with some of you. You are so evil. On a daily basis I'm attacked because of my body. [...] I have to tolerate a bit since I have a big blog and show my self and my outfit on a daily basis. I tolerate most things and most of the comments are written in a

positive spirit. I thank you for that! But I don't tolerate the comments I get from people who are insecure about their own body and self and put their troubles on me." (www.englishshowroom.se on the 10.4.2008)

This shows that the blog as a mirror can sometimes be used in not planned ways. But still, communication is one of the most important social circumstance and condition for identities to be created. Göthlund [9] argue that we learn different roles by playing and playing is necessary for self reflection. Without self reflection we can not understand our selves. The individual has to become objectified for them selves [17].The today's outfit does not just show the clothes. In the beginning of 2008 a discussion started among the bloggers about not calling these pictures "today's outfit" but instead "today's me", which is something that is spreading among fashion bloggers.

As Yvonne Eriksson and Anette Göthlund [5] state today's fashion photographs express a lot of different messages, several more messages than the clothes can reflect by themselves. In some photographs the clothes can seem invisible while the body expresses identities, dreams and a sense of community.

THE OUTFITS ARE ME

Something crossing my mind while looking at these fragments of self-portraits presented below, are that the clothes are really in the center and therefore expressed as most important, more important than showing your whole body. But at the same time as the clothes seem to be the most important; most of the pictures are still not really giving a good or clear picture of what the clothes look like. In the first picture, for example, you only see a fragment of something that could be a costume and on the second picture you can see part of the bikini and the shorts but the focus is on the stomach, a bare, sunburned, flat stomach. The male blogger stands with his feet a bit apart from each other, he stands firm with his left hand in his pocket, while the female blogger stands with her knees close together, holding her arms and hands so they are not seen on the picture.



Figure 1: Today's outfit by Stilrobin.
Figure 2: Today's outfit by Stinalee

HIDDEN BUT SEEN

There are also examples where bloggers simply cut the picture just above the neck, make the face blurry or in other ways hide their faces.

A couple of examples of this are shown below. In figure 3 the head is covered with a box where it reads: "The head is behind the box for your own sake. The thing behind the box is not human." The picture is then commented by a visitor: "Tss.. you have a face of a model John! You should be proud. In figure 4 the same blogger has covered his face with red and the text BLÄ (translated into English: the expression of disgusted, for example Ugh).



Figure 3: Today's outfit by John Valencia



Figure 4: Today's outfit by John Valencia

There are several who never show their whole body or their faces in their pictures. One of the reasons may be that they do not want to be re-cognized or that they do not wish to have to think about their facial expression, make up or hair.



Figure 5: Three versions of today's outfit by Breachofstyle. In one of the pictures he has covered his face with a picture of the actor James Dean.

In several of the today's outfits the eyes are hidden behind sunglasses or the blogger looks away from the camera even if the face otherwise is shown. None of the interviewed bloggers had an answer to why they did not look into the camera even if they usually took those kinds of pictures of themselves. This is interesting since in traditional self-portraits the face is most important and the eyes are said to be the mirror of the soul. What are they hiding? What are they hiding from?



**Figure 6: Today's outfit by Engla
Figure 7: Today's outfit by W2best**

Figure 6 and 7 are examples of the majority of pictures of today's outfit, where the head is not shown. Even if it can seem like the reason for this would be that they do not wish to be recognized I will address theories on the gaze in regard of these poses and also retouches of the photographs.

As seen in figure 6, 8 and 10 the blogger has used a mirror to take the picture. At the same time as the mirror can be seen as a convenient aid to take a self-portrait it can also be seen as something else. Seeing your mirror image is part of the way in which you learn to conceive of your self

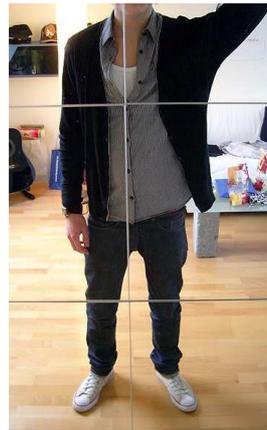


Figure 8: Today's outfit taken with aid of a mirror from Breachofstyle

This is something that seems to be the case in Swedish blogs where today's outfit is posted. The majority of the blogs are by females, but when it comes to male bloggers writing about the same topic (fashion and clothes) the style of the text and today's outfit is very similar. One blogger that play with the mirror more than other bloggers is John Valencia. It seems like he is well aware of what the mirror means and he is not afraid to use it both as an aid but also as a toy.



Figure 9: John Valencia in today's outfit, holding a mirror in front of his face

OBJECTIFICATION BY THE GAZE

In Walker's [20] discussion about the duality of subject and object in self-portraits she refers to Laura Mulvey [18] who has argued that the cinematic gaze tends to objectify the people it portrays. The gaze in these cases is all by the photographer who is the object at the same time. The object has chosen not to meet the eye of the camera and there for not the eye of the beholder. When the picture is later posted in the blog the beholder of the gaze is the blog visitor.

To "have" the gaze, to be able to look into the viewers eyes, is to have the power, the active role and the

possibility to appear as a subject. In a traditional portrait the focus is on the face and the face then stand for the whole person's self. The face and in particular the eyes are traditionally seen as the mirror to the person's soul. To deny the gaze is to dehumanize the object. Deprived the gaze of one's own the object is becoming an inactive object which can be viewed by an outsider. [5]



Figure 10: Today's outfit by Engla
Figure 11: Today's outfit by Stinalee
Figure 12: Today's outfit by Breachofstyle

As Mulvey [18] discussed the male gaze, so have several others. John Berger once noted, "Men 'act' and women 'appear.' Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." [1] It is common in commercial advertisement for the man to not look in to the camera while the woman always look into the camera. If you concentrate on gender there are a lot more girl's and women's posting today's outfits of themselves in the blog, but if you look at the pictures that are posted by both male and female there are hardly any differences in the poses in regard of gender. Berger [1] has furthermore stated that women watch themselves being looked at, meaning that women are acculturated to looks at themselves through the eyes of an imagined man because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male.

Since the clothes seem to be the most important in the picture of today's outfit the blogger may (unconsciously) dismiss the eyes of an imagined man by not looking in the camera. Since girl's and women first started with these kinds of pictures the boy's and men might have followed by copying the poses without reflecting on the beholder. There are also examples of where the blogger looks to the side or down to the floor (see figure 8-10).

In advertisements women are more often pictured than men in what Goffman [8] calls the recumbent position on floors, often associated with something less clean. Examples of these pictures exist in blogs but are very few. Goffman [8] also points out that women are often posed bending their heads or bodies at an angle, I.e., "cant." The effect of cant, he says, is that the level of the

head is lowered relative to that of others, including, indirectly, the viewer of the picture. The resulting configurations can be read as an acceptance of subordination, an expression of integration, submissiveness, and appeasement. Below are two examples from the one blogger.



Figure 13: Two examples from Beautifulones

Interesting in the case of photographs of today's outfit is that there seem to be very little differences between males and females. In a first glance it does not seem like theories about the male gaze can be applied directly on photographs of today's outfit. Almost identical poses are being used regardless of sex, while there are big differences in professional fashion photographs. There are some differences though that the viewer can notice after reading Richard Dyer's [4] description of the gaze of males in images aimed at women one can see that there are differences between males and females in today's outfit. Dyer writes:

Where the female model typically averts her eyes, expressing modesty, patience and a lack of interest in anything else, the male model looks either off or up. In the case of the former, his look suggests an interest in something else that the viewer cannot see. In the cases where the model is looking up, this suggests a spirituality, he might be there for his face and body to be gazed at, but his mind is on higher things, and it is this upward striving that is most supposed to please. (Dyer 1992, 104-9)

I have never come across a male posing like in figure 11 in a blog. There are also very few pictures of male bloggers sitting or laying down. In the blogs I have analyzed I have only found examples in one blog. In these examples the blogger can be seen as more active than in the pictures from the female blogger. In the first picture of figure 12 he appears to be doing his shoe laces and in the second picture of figure 12 he is sitting down relaxed, without seeming submissive. Actually the viewer is even lower than the object, while the female in the pictures above is lower than the viewer.



Figure 14: Two examples from Stilrobin

The blogger Beautifulones has several pictures of her face in her blog, this is very rare among bloggers posting today's outfit. In several of these pictures she has bright red lipstick (on the pictures with colors), her mouth a bit open and her finger in her mouth (see figure 13). Interesting is that you can not see her eyes. Her hair falls down in front of her eye and the other is not really in the picture. According to Eriksson and Göthlund there are different visual strategies to disarm the female gaze. One is to have the posing female to look away and by those means make her more available as an enjoyable eye-catcher, another way is to have her shut her eyes and a third way is to cut the picture by her neck (as many photographs have been cut in today's outfit). On a psychoanalytical level this can be seen as means to fetishize the model. By partly presenting the woman,



Figure 15: example from Beautifulones

she is still tempting to look at but at the same time harmless. [5] This could be applicable on the pictures of Beautifulones, but not on the other blog owners mentioned in this paper, since we can not narrow-mindedly focus on the look, but also on the context (today's outfit in private blogs where the focus is often the clothes). There is one blogger who is posting very unconventional pictures of herself (unfortunately she declined to my question to show her photographs in my paper and presentation). On several of the pictures she sit on her heels crouching with her knees stretched out so you can see her crotch. They are both very provocative and playful. Her blog is very provocative in general, while she writes about feminism, functions of her intestine and other often considered unfeminine subjects. I see her pictures as different, but different in a way she sees as positive. She seldom look away from the camera, instead she looks intensely straight into the camera. Göthlund [9] state that if there is a chance that you will be considered different in a negative sense, as deviant, and therefore risk to end up outside the community one wish to belong

to, one strategy can be to create a positive difference. This seems to apply on this blogger, but at the same time she dissociate from fashion blogs and the mainstream blog community.

The active look that the blogger in question has could be called "the come on look". The look invites the visitor to look at and establish some sort of relationship to the object. [13] The inviting look can be strengthened through the pose of the body and gestures. [5] Even if the look could be defined as a "come on look" and the posture could be sexually loaded since the crotch is emphasized, the context does not make it a sexual, pornographical or degraded posture, since the blogger consciously plays with gender roles by exaggeration and posing as a drag king in some of today's outfit.

TO BE DIFFERENT – TO BE THE SAME

Walker state that when you explore photos that are tagged with "me" or "self" or "self-portrait", you rapidly find that a lot of users have created photosets of photos of themselves. Many of these sets consist of unconventional self-portraits, showing the photographer's body from unusual angles, or showing sections of his or her body rather than the conventional head and shoulders shot. [20] This can also partly be noticed in pictures of today's outfits. Still and even if the self-portraits are unconventional, there are often resemblances to commercial photographs and fashion photographs taken in popular television programs as America's Next Top Model.

In the beginning of my project I was amazed of how similar the photos of today's outfit were. My suspicion that the bloggers posing were inspired by each other was confirmed in the interviews.

So, what is the difference between commercial photographs and pictures of today's outfit? What happens when people take their own self-portrait and publish it online? There seem to be few differences at a first glance. Looking closer, though, we can see that there are fewer differences between pictures taken by and of males and females in the blogs that I have studied. There are still some differences like; I could find a female posing in a sexually provocative posture on the ground but not a man. One the other hand I could also find a female posing in a gender provocative posture. Even if norms change fairly slowly, even in a new media where the blog owners seem to have the power, there are some changes. The blogger have the power to express themselves with digital technology in a new media, but in some limitations. When it comes to today's outfits one could actually talk about a networked identity.

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