

# Reconfiguring Embodiment: Online Experimentation and Embodied Practices of Self

## Abstract

This panel consists of the following papers: “Anonymity in Chatroulette: Embodied Practices Within Online Impression Management”; “The Embodied Mods: How Modders in Virtual Spaces Embody Practices of Self Through Virtual Community Creation and Values”; “There and back again - a Self-Shooters Tale: reconfiguring embodiment via selfies”; “Internet Dating: Technologies Appropriation of the Body for Targeted Relationship Initiation”. Research covers a variety of platforms – Chatroulette, tumblr.com; *Skyrim* Nexus; adultfriendfinder.com, and redhotpie.com.au. Authors have conducted visual narrative analysis; textual analysis of data pulled from a blended ethnographic study; autoethnographic analysis of active participation-observation, and discourse analysis.

## Keywords

embodied self; modding; self-shooting; internet dating; chatroulette

Advocates and critics alike have long claimed “virtuality” as a space of identity play, construction, and tourism, either a (safe) space of exploration (Alvesson et al, 2008; Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Baym, 2000; boyd, 2006, 2007; boyd & Heer, 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Daneback, 2006; Hardey, 2002; Joinson, 2008; Ross, 2005; Whitty, 2003) or zone of dysfunction and deceit (Brym & Lenton, 2001; Gibbs, Ellison & Heino, 2006; Toma, Hancock & Ellison, 2008). How do we navigate the space of intermixing, the borderlands of identities as the distinctions between “virtual” and “real” continues to blur (Orgad, 2009; Baym & Markham, 2009)? As online users blend digital and physical practices, the meanings attached to the self and the body are reconfigured, ranging from discovery to obfuscation.

In late-modernity, the body and the self have become sites of interaction, appropriation, and reappropriation (Giddens, 1991, p.218). Some users who experiment online are impelled to transition bodily, while others return to normative expression. Self-evaluation and playacting as ways of testing the boundaries of social roles may lead to reconfiguring of habits, customs, and representations. In this context, the increased participation in media content creation and the consequently blurred role of “gatekeeper” (see Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2007) is another factor in the reconfiguration of embodiment. For example, as a result of online experimentation, individuals may select a new hobby, career, or professional identity, and thus become a member of a physical community of practice, which would again minimize the distance between online and offline selves. Through produsage (Burns, 2006) practices, the virtual self is implemented into modified, cultural content (cf. ludic practices and identity, Aarseth, 1998). Some virtual worlds and online communities inspire a material turn, while others keep users bound within the “magic circle” of the digital imaginative.

Our work will examine the embodied identity projects in the borderlands of material and mediated self across a range of platforms and practices, including appropriation of users’ bodies and sexualities for the purpose of internet dating, modding as a form of cultural expression and community engagement, impression building in Chatroulette, and self-shooting as a technology of self. Our panel explores how online and offline practices reconfigure the meaning of the embodied self for ourselves and those around us through innovative applications of qualitative methodologies. Specifically, this panel’s authors conduct visual narrative analysis of images, captions, ethnographic field notes, and

interviews of a self-shooters' community on tumblr.com; textual analysis of data pulled from a blended internet ethnographic study including field research, interviews, and participant observation on the popular mod distribution and news channels Steam Workshop and *Skyrim* Nexus; autoethnographic analysis of active participation-observation in Chatroulette (Chatroulette.com), and discourse analysis of AdultFriendFinder (adultfriendfinder.com) and RedHotPie (redhotpie.com.au).

Through our combined research, this panel demonstrates the relationships between self and community, particularly within the blurred role of creator and consumer of game content while modding. It inspects how interactions or representations in internet dating sites can be incompatible with those in the actual world, not due to intended deceit, but because of a failure to recognize how the internet may allow the true self to be more easily expressed. This panel also offers the first academic examination of Chatroulette as an ethnographic site of analysis and demonstrates the importance of the socially-enacted, embodied self in online encounters that center upon quick evaluations of the body. In addition, it explores how we can construct a sexier, more lovable "reflexive body" as a result of aesthetic self-stylization and critical self-awareness in self-shooting and body-blogging.

Via analyses of the aforementioned virtual-material practices, this panel illuminates contemporary Internet research phenomena of modding, Chatroulette, self-shooting, and dating. This panel extends the discussion of embodied self-identity online and contributes to new knowledge on the material return of the body in the realm of the virtual.

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## **Internet Dating: Technologies Appropriation of the Body for Targeted Relationship Initiation**

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### **Abstract**

Internet Dating, defined within the parameters of Internet Dating Sites, is an aspect of internet usage that encourages the appropriation of users’ bodies and sexualities for a specific goal, often resulting in both intentional and unintentional deception. Using discourse analysis of two Internet Dating Sites this paper reveals how the commercial nature of these sites results in ‘branding’, therefore encouraging users explicitly and implicitly to construct a represented body that can easily be identified as the enacted body (a combination of the offline physical, and online representation) which frequently fails to be authentic. This does not necessarily imply deception, but instead has the potential to reveal the importance of the discourses operating within Internet Dating that appropriate bodies for commercial success and additionally how individuals contest or appropriate these discourses in return as part of their understanding of the body both on the internet and in the actual world.

### **Keywords**

internet dating; discourse analysis; body; sexuality; appropriation

Internet Dating, defined here as the usage of Internet Dating Sites, is an aspect of internet usage that is popular with many individuals who find it hard to develop relationships due to time restrictions in their daily lives or a lack of opportunity to circulate with potential suitors. This phenomenon has been

researched by a number of academics, in areas that cover the social, romantic, and even economical implications of the activity of 'partner shopping' (see Smaill, 2004; Hall, Park, Song, & Cody, 2010; Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008; Whitty, 2008; Whitty & Gavin, 2001; Fiore & Donath, 2004; Arvidsson, 2006; and others). Building upon this existing discussion is the opportunity to explore how these sites encourage the appropriation of users' bodies and sexualities for the purpose of Internet Dating, and how individuals respond to this with results of perceived 'authenticity' or 'deception'.

While Internet Dating Sites (IDS) are online locations where the focus is that of romance or sexuality, they are also a spotlight for how individuals may encounter accidental and premeditated forms of identity play that are reliant on the body. While the distinctions between 'virtual' and 'real' have continued to blur in our use of the internet and its associated digital technologies, online dating has always demanded transparency between online representation and actual world physicality. This poses an interesting dilemma for those individuals that choose to engage with these spaces, because each Internet Dating Site constructs an 'ideal' target or partner as a result of 'branding', an important aspect of the sites' commercial nature.

Acting within the digital space of the site, and within the commoditized discourses established by each dating 'brand', participants are implicitly and explicitly encouraged to construct a representation of the body (and self) that increases their chances of attracting a partner. But this representation must also be 'enacted' by the individual, that is to say it must have an agency and authenticity that can transition to the offline or actual world in order to meet the end goal of physical interaction. Thus the Internet Dating Site is a complex space where the represented and actual body is collapsed into an enacted form for its participants, while simultaneously establishing a scenario for failure due to discursive elements that promote plasticity and fluidity in regards to embodied practices of the self.

The complex interaction between self and body in online dating is discussed by Whitty and Carr (2006) in their book on *Cyberspace Romance*, which mentions the distinction between 'true' and 'actual' self. The true self is simply those characteristics that individuals possess and wish to express but are usually unable to demonstrate, while the actual self are those traits that are possessed and expressed to others successfully (Whitty & Carr, 2006, p. 24). These distinctions help to explain how interactions or representations in Internet Dating Sites can be incompatible with those in the actual world, not because of intended deceit, but a failure to recognize how the internet may allow the true self to be more easily expressed. This also translates into how the body is enacted on Internet Dating Sites, especially due to their commercial influence, where self and physical features become interchangeable as markers of desirability. Featherstone's comment on the body in consumer culture is particularly relevant to this situation, in that "Within consumer culture, the inner and outer body became conjoined: the prime purpose of the maintenance of the inner body becomes the enhancement of the appearance of the outer body" (1982, p 18).

Our physicality, our sense of self, in these spaces can be determined by a drop down list of possibilities – and more importantly these can be altered based upon positive or negative reception, and given monetary value by the site charging perspective partners for information access. What is worth more? Breast size or eye colour? Sexual proclivities or weight? Star sign or length of endowment? With the introduction of webcams to internet dating, it could be expected that the difficulty in collapsing the distinction between representation and actual would be easier, because the enacted body can be visually conveyed in real-time with others; however, this is not necessarily a means of providing the authenticity that is frequently demanded by participants. It may simply reveal the user's ability to 'play' with digital technology by engaging in performative activities tailored to their audience. Indeed, individuals may be fully aware of the effects that individual Dating Sites have in regards to 'branding', and may utilize this to create profiles across multiple websites that each cater to a specific 'ideal target'. How the body is integrated into the Internet Dating Site by users and the website itself to achieve the 'targeted initiations of intimacy' (Sprecher, 2009, p. 768), the commercial effects that occur, and the discourse that is constructed as a result, has the potential to reveal how individuals act out resistance or appropriate this technology for relationships.

By utilizing Foucauldian discourse analysis as a methodology, two Internet Dating Sites are explored to reveal their basic components and how users are encouraged to construct specific styles of 'profiles' to represent themselves. Existing research also provides a substantial amount of theoretical background to build upon, helping to encompass a wider range of Internet Dating Sites and revealing common themes that exist within the phenomenon. The two sites explored for the purposes of this short panel paper are AdultFriendFinder (adultfriendfinder.com) and RedHotPie (redhotpie.com.au); these two examples are focused on sexual relationships, and therefore offer the perfect opportunity to focus on the body rather than other compatibility features (such as eHarmony.com.au). Because the focus of this research is on how the sites, as a technology, generate a discourse that encourages its members to construct their enacted bodies within certain specifications to ensure successful target initiation, a discourse analysis approach that deconstructs the elements that structure the content created by the users (akin to many prosumer activities online such as Social Networking Sites) is potentially more productive than an investigation of the users themselves who may be implicitly influenced by their interaction.

Positioned as commodities within modern consumer culture society, the members of Internet Dating Sites are ultimately influenced by the associated images of 'the look' and the consumer body (Featherstone, 1982). Both advertisers and targets emphasize certain features which commonly lead to claims of deception, but while enhancements to the represented body sometimes fail to correspond to the actual body upon successful initiation (during offline meetups), this does not imply that it fails to undergo the same enhancements (e.g. hair dyes, makeup, slimming clothes, push up bras); instead, this inconsistency points towards the importance of the enacted body as hybrid between performance and material. Deception, whether intentional or simply the result of a misplaced belief in the 'plasticity' of the body, occurs only when the 'body work' undertaken in both the represented and actual body fails to correspond. As Featherstone (1982) and Bauman (1998) have illustrated our actual bodies are subject to consumer society and a discourse that requires continuous self-improvement, physically and sexually, suggesting that the 'enacted' could offer greater insight to comprehending activities that rely on the body in online/offline associations (i.e. sex is not simply mediated on the internet as a form of representation). It may also be that IDS reflect a wider and all encompassing dilemma, online and offline, enacted and represented, in regards to what the 'ideal target's' body for sexuality actually is or could be.

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## **Anonymity in Chatroulette: Embodied Practices Within Online Impression Management**

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### **Abstract**

Focusing on Chatroulette as my case study provides a view into a unique, online environment for impression formation, one marked by a lack of advertisements, registration, and repetition. This unusual context does not lead to utopic relationships; rather, web camera-mediated behavior reveals not only racial and gender stereotyping, but also faster decisions about connection expressions. I combine critical autoethnography with participant observation for a qualitative study on how online impressions in a visual context with strangers are created in immediate, quick bursts of time, particularly in a public, anonymous environment. As an Asian American female readily identified by Chatroulette participants, I find that making a “good impression” online is superficially skin-deep sometimes; embodiment matters.

### **Keywords**

anonymity; impressions; embodiment; visual; racism

### **Introduction**

Nudity sells (Stanley, 2011), and nudity has helped to sell Chatroulette as a voyeuristic website. Popular television programs, like *The Daily Show With John Stewart* and *Tosh.0*, have said that I would see mostly young, white guys exposing themselves if I logged on Chatroulette. Closer to home, a classmate of mine texted: “Chat roulette [*sic*], never tried it. I heard it was mostly just guys showing their penis.” **Nudity** was what I expected from Chatroulette.

Aside from the titillation, Chatroulette is unusual because the website is free of advertisements and registration. Chatroulette’s built-in “roulette” structure pairs partners adventitiously (akin to the game of chance in its namesake), which makes repetition of participants highly unlikely. The three attributes of no advertisements, no registration, and no repetition create an interesting context in which to study impressions of embodied interactions. In contrast to current models of impression

theory that are built upon impression formation cascading upon each encounter among the same people (Chambliss, 1965; Gardner & Martinko, 1988), Chatroulette allows for only single episodes between each party (Ostrow, 1996). Under anonymity (Fainzang, 1994; Shulman, 1990; Jessup, Connolly, & Galegher, 1990; Connolly, Jessup, & Valacich, 1990) and with no possibility for sanctions against socially unacceptable behavior (Stuber, Galea, & Link, 2009), individuals may choose to create unfavorable impressions online via racist and lewd behavior (Flynn, Chatman, & Spataro, 2001). This pilot study updates embodied practices of the self from text-based to video-based computer-mediated communication (Boler, 2007) and is the first to focus on Chatroulette as an ethnographic site of analysis (Pribek, 2010). Searches in multiple databases reveal that research on Chatroulette behavior is scarce. Specifically, scholars in JSTOR have not yet examined Chatroulette as a site for study. Similarly, Google Scholar only yielded two works in English, one as a conference proceeding and the other as a master's thesis, both of which focused on male sexual voyeurism (Kreps, 2010; Umut, 2010). This study also builds upon impression formation theory by focusing on the importance of the body in immediate, one-time impression constructions in an online, public, and anonymous environment.

### **Theoretical Background**

Generally, impression theory has looked at how impressions are constructed over time (Chambliss, 1965; Gurevitch, 1984). The time factor allows for impressions to build through repetition, creating favorable and unfavorable impressions as the parties meet each other consistently (Becker & Martin, 1995). The process of impression creation over time turns strangers into individuals familiar with one another (Chambliss, 1965; Gardner & Martinko, 1988). Impressions are happening in Chatroulette too, but online embodiment within Chatroulette provides an atypical context for impression construction. Specifically, I focus on first-time impressions that occur immediately with strangers because Chatroulette offers no way to create lasting impressions over time (Ostrow, 1996). Once an episode ends in Chatroulette, returning to that same partner is virtually impossible. Chatroulette's unusual structure complicates impression theory models via its focus on instantaneity and unfamiliarity. I also theorize how anonymity (Fainzang, 1994; Shulman, 1990; Jessup, Connolly, & Galegher, 1990; Connolly, Jessup, & Valacich, 1990), defined by the lack of information connecting users to one another outside of what is shown on the screen immediately, might affect impression theory. Chatroulette's anonymity, with no user registration and no advertisements, adds interesting context for impression creation in an online environment that focuses on the embodied self.

### **Methodology**

For collecting data during my pilot study, I employed autoethnography (Clough & Ellis, 1997; Kogut, 2005) as an active participant-observer in Chatroulette (Kawulich, 2005). In each Chatroulette session, I wore the same clothing to minimize differences in the visual elements I presented to various parties. I limited each session to thirty minutes or less, across several different partners, to prevent fatigue, and I relinquished the power to find a new partner to the other party. In other words, I was willing to communicate with each partner until that party ended our encounter. I analyzed poise (Goffman, 1967) and general body language, in addition to examining verbal language (Bakhtin, 1935) and speech patterns during our interactions. I also noted when and to what extent nudity arose.

Initially, I examined my Chatroulette sessions using the constructivist grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1995; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Stamp, 1999; Charmaz, 2000; Charmaz, 2006; Pandit, 1996). To develop an inductively-derived model, I employed systematic procedures to produce a set of relationships among concepts, experiences, and events, across each

party and various sessions. For my pilot study, I analyzed the data in a three-stage process of open, axial, and selective coding (Becker & Stamp, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In open coding, I closely examined my data from Chatroulette chats for similarities and differences and created encompassing categories. After the data were separated into categories, the groupings were unified by axial coding, wherein relationships among the classifications were explored, particularly with respects to the conditions that preceded them and the constructed contexts in which they were embedded (Becker & Stamp, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 1995; Charmaz, 2000). The data were further integrated through the process of selective coding in which categories were systematically linked to one another in different orders and clusters to determine the most sensible arrangement of the data (Becker & Stamp, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A process of constant comparison was used until data saturation had been reached, and sufficient theory about impression construction had emerged from the data (Pandit, 1996). As a result, an impression creation model that was firmly grounded in the data was developed reflecting the actual experience of Chatroulette users.

## Conclusions

Unlike other social networking sites (Pearson, 2009), identity performance is necessarily curtailed in the speedy context of Chatroulette which focuses on immediate, anonymous, one-time visual impressions in a non-commercialized, electronically-mediated environment. In Chatroulette, these impressions demonstrate the importance of the socially-enacted, embodied self in online encounters that center upon quick evaluations of the body presented through a screen, which manifests in how long parties stay attached together and in how parties react specifically to the physicality of an Asian American woman. This scrutiny may import the same standards of the body in the physical world (Robinson, 2007), but exploratory forays into Chatroulette suggest that overtly racist and lewd behavior in reaction to others' bodies may become prevalent in anonymous online environments. This understanding has practical implications as we develop technology that enables anonymity as a widespread option. I explore the common adage of "making a good first impression" in computer-mediated environments with no accountability and no possibility for sanctions against socially unacceptable behavior. This study provides a baseline for understanding how behavior operates in online environments that foster anonymity. In future research, contrasts will be made between the behavior studied here and behavior in online contexts that require real name registration (like Facebook), adding a layer of potential accountability.

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## **Embodied Mods: How Modders in Virtual Spaces Embody Practices of Self Through Virtual Community Creation and Values**

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Abstract**

Using legally distributed software development kits, “modders” – or users of software and video games who modify game content – are able to create and distribute their own content, illustrating the principles of convergence through voluntary free labor. This paper focuses on how specific modders define themselves through discourses, practices, languages, styles, codes, rituals, and values, and how these modders used the technologies and interactions to create embodied versions of themselves. Does the modding community inspire a material turn into self-sustenance of creation, or keep users bound within the “magic circle” of the digital imaginative? What are the values of a culture of practice? How are those values propagated? I examined the community of modders for popular role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, Results suggest that these embodied practices of community-building in modding suggest that users create forms of authority in this community, and that these rewards may have real-world consequences.

### **Keywords**

modding; virtual community; embodiment; voluntary labor; field studies

New advancements made in digital and social technology have started to change the roles that consumers have in media production and industries (Bruns, 2008; Banks & Humphreys, 2008; Banks & Potts, 2010; van Dijck, 2010; Bird, 2011). Participation in media content creation has blurred the role of the “gatekeeper” of information and power with the interactive culture afforded by new media and technology (cf. Jenkins, 2006; Deuze, 2007). Yet, in today's prosumerist culture, many users of

digital media create content without expecting any explicit financial or material reward (see Ritzger & Jurgenson, 2010). Previous research on voluntary, free participation in media work has revealed that these users often perform these actions for personal reasons. Many social media networks (such as Facebook and Tumblr) have found success based on these principles of immaterial audience creation, distribution, and convergence.

Within the media industry of video games, the concepts of unpaid voluntary labor (also known as “immaterial labor”), participatory content creation and online communities are found in “modders,” defined as *users of software and video games who modify game content*, which is done by using a software development kit (SDK). Modding does not occur through illegal practices since many SDKs are authorized by professional gaming developers. Mods represent a valuable source of low-risk innovation and experimentation within the games industry. Modding also holds potential as a distinctly recreational, collective, and sometimes anti-capitalist pursuit that is focused around embodied practices of self. Through these practices, the virtual self is implemented into the modified content of games, which extends the literature on ludic practices and identity (see Aarseth, 1998; Juul, 2001). Further exploration of the modding community would offer greater insight into the personal and social reasons for modding. Finally, principles of modding inform the use and implementation of social media as users create, distribute, and remix content across a variety of platforms, performing immaterial labor while other commercial parties can potentially benefit from these practices.

Previous research on modding (e.g., Banks, 2005; Kücklich, 2005; Nieborg & van der Graaf, 2008; Postigo, 2003, 2007, 2008; Sotamaa, 2005, 2007a, 2007b) has examined its practices through informal surveys, questionnaires, and secondhand information passed to researchers. Few of these studies have implemented ethnographic field methods for modder research. Therefore, while research has examined the copyright issues (Postigo, 2008), awareness of perceived role inside and outside the industry (Kücklich, 2005), and potential for modding to enhance media convergence of companies (see Jenkins, 2006; Postigo, 2008), no study has fully explored the ways that these communities organize themselves. The importance of the interactions and outputs of modders is not limited solely to the video game industry. Modding communities represent an example of the changing nature of media work for many industry professionals and non-professional media users transitioning to more participatory forms of cultural industry production (Deuze, 2007; Postigo, 2007; Postigo, 2010), thus suggesting and defining forces increasingly at play within other systems that incorporate user content. Yet those areas and their real-world applications are currently unknown.

Therefore, my wider research explores how groups of modders form communities. This paper focuses on how they define themselves through discourses, practices, languages, styles, codes, rituals, and values, and how these modders used the technologies and interactions to create embodied versions of themselves. Does the modding community inspire a material turn into self-sustenance of creation, or keep users bound within the “magic circle” of the digital imaginative? What are the values of a culture of practice? How are those values propagated?

To explore these questions, I examined select groups of modders of popular role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (10+ million copies sold worldwide), and these modders were located on the popular mod distribution and news channels **Steam Workshop** and **Skyrim Nexus**. In 2012, *Skyrim* developers Bethesda Softworks released a free software development tool called the **Creation Kit** to computer players. The Creation Kit allowed users to modify the game content, at which point the user could publically release their mods through an authorized Steam Workshop channel. As of January 2013, 12,958 mods were available to download on the Steam Workshop for *Skyrim* users. Based on textual analysis of data pulled from a blended internet ethnographic study (using field research,

interviews, and participant observation) of modder practices and boards, I conducted a study using the theoretical lens provided by previous research on critical media studies (Peterson & Anand, 2004; Deuze, 2007; Martin & Deuze, 2009).

Theoretically, by allowing and encouraging modders to share their creations via the Steam Workshop and other distributors, Bethesda has created a way for these modders to form a collective of sorts through user-generated content and dissemination (e.g. Jenkins, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Fuchs, 2010, 2011). In addition, news sites such as *Skyrim Nexus* offers a group of “lead users” who collectively identify and exploit opportunities to improve the way *Skyrim* works through their own practices. These modding activities could be important drivers of particular communities of *Skyrim* modders, and significant in the co-creation of a particular version of *Skyrim*’s emergent modding culture because it creates a separation between users based on perceived skill levels. These embodied practices of community-building in modding suggest that users create forms of authority in this community, and that these rewards may have real-world consequences. By focusing on *Skyrim* and the creation of structure and values by its groups of users, I attempt to bridge previous academic research on online communities, critical media industry studies, and gatekeeping roles in media to professional needs and concerns.

Findings suggest that *Skyrim* modders engage in the practice of voluntary labor and community participation for personal reasons. The amount of time spent in this community is seen as an extension of the self, and a way to sustain creative impulses that is rewarded by game playing. For some modders, the practice of modding reconfigures the meanings we attach to our self by placing themselves in a blurred role of creator and consumer of game content. This blurring of amateur and professional role provides a reward for the user, and the community dynamics places a reward for users based on mastery of skills and abilities in modding. The practices of modding suggests that the community of modders rewards users much like fan communities and groups formed around shared interests, where knowledge and skill become arbiters of success.

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# There and back again - a Self-Shooters Tale: reconfiguring embodiment via selfies.

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## Abstract

This paper is based on visual narrative analysis of data collected with self-shooters in a NSFW blogging community on tumblr.com. Using concepts of “reflexive body”, “erotic looking glass” and Foucault’s technologies of the self, and illuminated self-shooting as a transformative practice, which resulted in a changed perception of one’s self and one’s body, increased levels of self-confidence and sexual life-satisfaction. Photos serve as an embodied identity construction tool and a currency for social interaction.

## Keywords

visual narrative analysis; self-shooting; body blogging; reflexive body; technology of the self

The mass taking and sharing of self-portraits, also known colloquially as “selfies,” has become more popular and convenient with the proliferation of mobile cameras and the social media sites. Because digital photographic processes have eliminated darkroom development and digital devices enable more privacy, an increasing amount of people are experimenting with taking sexy selfies. The widespread and problematized practice of “sexting,” in combination with the range of various sites designated for the naked bodies of “amateurs,” is an indication of the simultaneous popularization of sharing those private images. This paper analyses the practices of self-shooting within a NSFW (not safe for work) blogging community on tumblr (launched in 2007, hosts over 90 million blogs (January 2013)), exploring how one becomes a self-shooter and how that self-categorization reconfigures the meaning of the embodied self.

Photos no longer serve merely the function of memory, but are increasingly a tool for identity formation and communication (van Dijk, 2008). Pictures are currency for social interaction: they circulate between individuals and groups to establish and reconfirm bonds (*ibid*, p. 62) and to tell the stories of what we are and what we are not (Riessman, 2008). Concurrently, they offer a ‘safe space’ (Muise, 2011) for various practices that may elsewhere be hidden. Online we construct ‘stigma suspending spaces’ (Waskul, 2004, p. 40), where we can experiment with (sexual) behavior (i.e., “being naked on the internet”) with less fear of repercussions and by engaging in an activity “without actually doing it” (Ross, 2005).

This paper is based on visual narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) of images, captions, rolling commentary on reblogged selfies as well as ethnographic field notes; and interviews (November 2001 and 2012; December 2011) with self-shooters in a NSFW blogging community on tumblr. Analysis of self shooters’ (17 people aged 20 – 51, from USA, Australia, New-Zealand, Canada and UK)

individual and group interviews illuminated self-shooting as a transformative practice. Taking and posting pictures of oneself and the offshoot interactions resulted in a changed perception of one's self and one's body, increased levels of self-confidence and sexual life-satisfaction. Illustrative cases were then selected, and, working the interface between the visual and the textual data, contextualized and interpreted in the light of theoretical concepts of 'reflexive body' (Giddens, 1991), 'erotic looking glass' (Waskul, 2004) and two aspects of Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self: critical self-awareness and aesthetic self-stylization. This analysis brought into view how embodied identities are constructed in images, and how the meanings one has attached to their own body gets reconfigured through self-shooting and posting.

Although some people claim to be 'born self-shooters,' most become one in the interactive context of a community of practice: seeing other people's images, one wants to know what they would look like in a picture like this, and how others might react. Audience pressure also exists: selfies are proof of life and an indicator of belonging. As one grows accustomed to posting and the feedback, the patterns and practices may change. Initially fun / arousing / exciting on its own, self-shooters later claim to need a specific idea, a flash of inspiration, a prop or an external prompt (an email or a request from an online lover) for a photo shoot. This feedback cycle can be conceptualized as the process of a transforming embodied self: as we internalize a reconfigured embodiment, we get used to it until further transformation happens.

We recreate ourselves through aesthetic self-stylization (Foucault, 1983). Selfies shape the meaning of one's embodied identity so we can view a selfie as the body. People post pictures of themselves where they like what they see, and the more pictures they take, the more things they find to like about themselves. It is a constitutive, creative practice. For my informants, self-shooting means increased confidence, self-esteem and body-acceptance. Thus, in their images, self-shooters construct themselves as 'beautiful' or 'deviant', 'more than just a husband/wife, parent and an employee', or someone who 'likes their body instead of trying to not hate it'. Self-shooting and body-blogging, with its communal aspects, help participants put a focus on what is in the shadows in their lives otherwise and reintroduce themselves to a piece of them that has been buried:

*under 20 years of marriage, 4 children, and the mantles of "wife", "mother", "neighbor", "coworker", and every other role I fill in my daily life. (F, 41, USA).*

Self-images, due to the fact that self-shooters know they will be watched and their bodies will be objects of desire, allow people reconfigure the meaning of their body and a sexy body (from an age, size, shape perspective), and to change the perception of their "shelf-life as a sexually desirable woman". Via the erotic looking-glass of selfies, people start seeing the likable aspects of their own bodies, but selfies also illuminate various preferences, kinks and fantasies and help embrace one's embodied self as a sexual self.

*... it's definitely made me proud of my sexuality and who I am in that regard, that's definitely a positive to take forward in relationships' (M, late-20s, USA).*

Critical self-awareness (by becoming more self-reflexive) is at the core of Foucault's (1984) understanding of technologies of self. By questioning what seems 'natural,' a critically self-aware individual sees the 'possibilities of transgression' and the 'potential for new subjective experiences' (Markula, 2003). In a true act of critical self-awareness, seeing oneself through a web-cam or a phone-cam lens has allowed many self-shooters a gaze free of body-dysmorphic distortions for the first time in their lives. In addition to the act of self shooting, the interactive practices of posting one's images

and commenting on other' help cultivate the self-reflexivity and self-awareness and thus transform both psychologically:

*No matter how much you hate your body, there is someone on tumblr., who likes it.  
There is literally a place for every body on tumblr. ' (F, 37, USA)*

and materially:

*'the pictures I posted, mostly were to help me kind of fish for compliments when my wife wasn't giving me the feedback I wanted, but the feedback I got from tumblr. kept me motivated to keep working out and keep dieting. (M, 36, USA).*

We live in a late modern “somatic society” (Turner, 1984), where our social anxieties are often transferred to our bodies; in a consumer culture where body image is an imperative (Featherstone, 2010); and in a “striptease culture” (McNair, 2002) that focuses on display, confessions and self-revelation reinforced in various forms of online self-presentation. The body like the self, has become a “site of interaction, appropriation and reappropriation” (Giddens, 1991, p.218). In self-shooting we construct our narrative of embodied selfhood via fantasy, control, self-exploration, -expression, and –enhancement; we construct a sexier, more lovable body.

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