



Writing Identity: gendered values and user content creation in SNS interaction among Estonian and Swedish tweens

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ABSTRACT Tweens (10-14-year-olds) in Estonia and Sweden were interviewed about their experience and understanding of gender construction on social networking sites (SNS). The interviews indicate that peer culture is the most important dimension and a source of inspiration for the young when writing their identity online. Gendered norms and values are prominent in these activities, especially in the manipulated images being produced by the tweens. The latter practice is most explicit among the girls, especially when it comes to Photoshopping. The findings suggest that both girls and boys are well aware of what images are acceptable to publish as well as how to act and pose in front of the camera.

Introduction

It has been stated that ‘online spaces are framed by a kind of compulsory individuality, where the “freedom” to express oneself becomes a requirement, which then allows identities to be managed and regulated’ (Willett, 2008, p. 56). As it now is a requirement among the young to be able to express and manage oneself in online spaces in general, and on social networking sites (SNS) in particular, these arenas – built around social interaction that is ‘visible to the peer group more than to adult surveillance’ (Livingstone, 2008, p. 396) – obviously play an important role in the life-world of present-day young people. Children of the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998), by taking part in ‘spaceless’ web communities, are participants in a globalised childhood (Prout, 2005) where they meet, interact, present themselves, do homework, and use a multitude of communication modes (Kress, 2009) – all being accessed with ever more ubiquitous digital technologies.

So, when a tween is writing her/his relational identity (Hall, 1996) into being on an SNS, s/he is not just a producer of the subjective identity, but also a co-producer of an (online) peer culture, consolidating norms and values about how to understand and represent the socially constructed dualistic gendered self, gender being not just the primary categories in the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990), but also a source of inspiration (as well as restriction) as young people reflect upon and develop their relational identity. And, we argue, this identity construction is especially significant when tweens write their identity on the social-relational and communicative arena of an SNS. Hence, in the context of our research, we acknowledge the need to view ‘young people as significant social actors in their own right, as “beings”, and not simply “becomings” who should be judged in terms of their projected futures’ (Buckingham, 2008, p. 19). Accordingly, young people are beings *and* becomings since they are in a process of development (Prout, 2005), as children (as well as adults) ‘should be seen through a multiplicity of becomings in which we all are incomplete and dependent’ (Lee, 2001, p. 67).

The aim of the present article is to study how tweens in Estonia and Sweden describe and understand visual gender identities as represented in SNS. Being based upon the observations and experiences by tweens active in SNS, the article is focused on analysing the role of norms and values, and hence on the peer-culture context of constructing one's profile-image gender identity on SNS. Rather than aiming for a comparative study between Sweden and Estonia, our aim is to describe the visual SNS gender identity construction process through the eyes of tweens living in two distinct cultures.

Estonia and Sweden, with their respective SNS communities, were chosen for the case studies because of both the differences and the similarities between them. In the matter of similarities, for example, both countries have a rather high computer and Internet penetration rate among young people – four in five of 9-16-year-olds use the Internet daily (Livingstone et al, 2010, p. 29). Hence, both are considered to be high-user countries in Europe in terms of young people's Internet penetration (Livingstone et al, 2011). Another similarity between Estonia and Sweden that is important in relation to the theme of this article is that the native language of each country (Estonian and Swedish) is mainly spoken only by these countries' inhabitants. Hence, the most popular youth-oriented SNS in the respective countries, such as Rate [1] in Estonia and Lunarstorm or Bilddagboken [The image diary] [2] in Sweden, have been native speaking. Only lately has Facebook become the number one SNS among Swedish youth, with 49% of 9-16-year-olds having their own profile (Livingstone, Ólafsson & Staksrud, 2011, p. 4).

The uniqueness of our study lies not only in the fact that we have tried to grasp the occurrence of the same phenomenon in different cultural contexts, but also in its sample. The majority of studies that have analysed identity construction on SNS have used student samples (Manago et al, 2008; Zhao et al, 2008; Wang et al, 2009; Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Peluchette & Karl, 2010) or adolescent samples (Livingstone 2008; Siibak 2009b). In our study we focused upon analysing the perceptions of contemporary tweens (10 to 14 years old) – that is, the user group for whom – despite the fact that many SNS providers try to restrict their users to 13-year-olds and above (e.g. Facebook, Hi5, Tuenti) – SNS has become one of the most popular online activities it is engaged in (Livingstone, Ólafsson & Staksrud, 2011). Furthermore, to the knowledge of the authors, no studies before this one have aimed to give an overview of the visual identity construction practices of tweens in the context of two different cultures.

User-Generated Content and Human Creativity

The user of digital media can be described as a content producer in a participatory media culture (Jenkins, 2006) who moves between the roles of consumer and producer. This possibility of taking part actively in the creation of media content is one of the characteristics that distinguish digital media from traditional media (television, radio, newspapers, and so on) and the more passive forms of media consumption. We use the term *passive* here to mean no real possibility of influencing or creating content. But when the user also becomes a producer, or 'produser', to use the terminology of Bruns (2006), the mutually affecting relation between the media and the user does become a central quality of digital media and digital media use. This means, consequently, that the creativity of the human subject is not just accepted and/or encouraged, it is often of crucial importance for the development of digital media content.

Related to the life-world of tweens, this human creativity can be seen in the context of online gaming and blogging as well as on SNS – all representing new forms of media use that are more or less frequently practised among young people in Estonia, Sweden and the majority of western countries (Livingstone et al, 2011). Blogging and SNS are also examples of digital media use where the actions of the user are of crucial importance both in the development of the media content and in how other users will act or react. The content of the blog is, just like the content of the online gaming world or the social network, user generated and thus in constant change. In this respect, digital media are constantly 'under construction' (as was the insistence of the ever-present logo of the Internet of the mid-1990s), challenging the notions of 'final version' and 'definite truth'.

The tweens interacting with digital media are thus not just 'produsers' of media content, but metaphorically they can also be understood as active 'produsers' in the construction of personal identity. When creating a gaming avatar, when writing on his or her personal blog, or when

publishing personal information on an SNS, the user is interacting with the representation of him/herself. This self is created before the eyes of the 'producer' and hence is also open to negotiation.

In this context, the user/producer should be looked upon as a socio-cultural subject with life-world experiences and expectations. Referring to the fact that human action and meaning-making are inextricably interlaced with the prevalent power structures of the surrounding world, where gender is a predominant example of such a power structure, we use the concept gender in the meaning of the social construction of norms and values related to the stereotypical binary categories of male and female and the masculine and feminine attributes associated with those categories (see Connell, 2003). This fostering of gender roles and of the normative values of feminine and masculine is already intertwined with the identity development of children from very young ages (Chodorow, 1988; Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg, 1989; Davies, 2003). As an expression of power structures, according to an intersectionalist perspective, gender is one of several analytical categories (others being age, ethnicity, class, function, etc.) (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005; McCall, 2005; Lykke, 2010).

Power structures can be found in artefacts (Berg & Lie, 1995), interaction patterns (Eidevald, 2009), speech acts (Öqvist, 2009) and every other cultural phenomenon. In the terminology of intersectionalist feminist theory, human action and cultural phenomena need to be understood in relation to power differentials and identity markers such as gender, sexuality, biological and cultural age, ethnicity, peer culture, etc. (Lykke, 2010). It is important to note that power differentials and identity markers are not only present, they are often critical factors affecting human interpretation and consequently human action. In their constructivist feminist reading, Berg & Lie (1995) state that gender is inscribed in the artefacts, but also that this is no deterministic or final position.

Artefacts do have gender and gender politics in the sense that they are designed and used in gendered contexts. But holding that gender is inscribed in technologies does not mean that they are not open to change. (Berg & Lie, 1995, p. 347)

Technologies, and the use of them, are therefore open to interpretation, which is a fundamental starting point for feminist criticism of technology (see Haraway, 1991; Stone, 1995). This critical potential is based on the notion of the human being as a constructivist subject, being a melting pot of experiences and intentions. The human being is thus positioned in a social, cultural and historical setting, inseparable from the power differentials and identity markers of the contemporary society.

The tweens interacting in an SNS are thus also interacting with societal power structures as they are represented in these social arenas. Representation should here be understood, on the one hand, as the conditions set by the interface, rules of conduct and so on, and on the other hand, as manifestations of the actions as well as interactions between the users of the SNS. This latter sense of the word includes such examples as how the user chooses to present her/himself, comments on images and expressions, popularity polls, and so on. In the analysis below, we will focus on how tweens describe and understand visual gender identities or their making of the body-self as represented in SNS.

The Making of the Body-Self

In their interactions, humans use as well as shape the categorization [3] positions of gender, race, age, etc. Tweens interacting in web communities, or writing their identity on SNS, are no exception. Writing should here be understood in its broad meaning, involving such modalities as typographical text, fonts, graphical style, colour, image, composition of the object, postproduction (i.e. Photoshopping), sampling, linking, intertextual remarks, and so on. Identity is stated to be 'a very broad and ambiguous concept' (Buckingham 2008, p. 18). However, in the above-mentioned context we regard identity as a fluid and non-stable nomadic phenomenon (see Braidotti, 1994; Kennedy, 2006) that is prominent in a certain situation (Hall, 1996). This nomadic identity is thus part of a multidimensional and relational whole, and is an intentional response to the pervasive challenge of the contemporary society to interpret and create oneself (Holm Sørensen, 2001). In other words, in the course of our study the concept of identity is used to draw readers' attention to 'critical questions about personal development and social relationships – questions that are crucial

to our understanding of young people's growth into adulthood and the nature of their social and cultural experiences' (Buckingham, 2008, p. 19).

The online body-self (Hernwall, 2009) created by the members of the digital generation is a multimodal 'narrative project' (Pitts, 2003, p. 31), negotiated in the interactional space of the SNS. The identity, as it appears on the SNS, is a construction and a negotiation, something that is given its meaning in its social and historical context. All of this seems to afford a rather homogeneous notion of aesthetic, gender, ethnic, etc. values. This means that power differentials and identity markers are experienced, expressed and reconstructed in an ongoing process of actions and interactions. Consequently, 'writing the self into being' (boyd, 2008) on an SNS is a deliberate action made by each tween that includes one or more modalities.

Images mediated by different kinds of media help to construct norms and values - for instance, in terms of what is considered beautiful and worth striving for (Bordo, 2003), being models for gendered bodies, appearances, and actions. Having the freedom to construct an identity on an SNS does reveal societal stereotypes (Nakamura, 2002) rather than challenging them. The results of several empirical studies reveal that, rather than experimenting with totally new identity constructs, young people tend to construct identities that are highly influenced by the media and advertisement industries (Siibak, 2007, 2009a,b). In other words, the presentation of the body-self on an SNS is frequently just a reflection of existent norms and values pervasive in the contemporary surrounding culture and carried forward by the present-day media (Strano, 2008; Young, 2008; Mikkola et al, 2008).

The Study

From October 2009 to March 2010, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10-12-year-old users of the SNS Rate in Estonia (February-March 2010, $n=21$), and with 10-14-year-old children in Sweden (October-November 2009, $n=70$). In Sweden, the focus-group method was chosen for the interviews (17 interviews), which were carried out among students in different schools. In Estonia, the first contact was established through a parent of a pre-teen who could potentially participate in the study. A semi-structured interview was carried out to see if acceptance would be given by the pre-teen and the parent. After conducting the first interview, the respondent then referred to the next person in their social network who might potentially also contribute to the study - that is, the snowball sampling method was used for compiling the sample. Participation in the interviews was voluntary in both countries, and informed consent forms were signed either by the school authorities or by the respondents' parents. The socio-demographic factors taken into account in both places were age and gender.

Age	10	11	12	13	14	Total
Girls EE	3	5	5	0	0	13
Boys EE	2	3	3	0	0	8
Girls SE	8		6			14
Boys SE	4		3		10	17
	17	8	17	0	10	52

Table I. Age and gender of the respondents. The Swedish interviews were group interviews, the Estonian semi-structured individual interviews.

The style of the interviews was based on a qualitative interviewing technique consisting of a flexible outline of topics and questions (Patton, 2002). A pre-prepared interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to help guide the interviews. The tweens were also encouraged to demonstrate their profiles and the images uploaded on their SNS accounts or available on their mobile phones. The length of the interviews varied, ranging from half an hour to slightly more than one hour.

All of the interviews were transcribed and the transcripts analysed by means of cross-case analysis, to provide an opportunity to come across similarities as well as differences between the

visual gender identity constructions among Estonian and Swedish tweens. Extracts from the interviews are used to illustrate the analysis.

As we did not aim to conduct a comparative study between Estonian and Swedish tweens, the composition of the samples was secondary to the qualities of the data collected. In other words, we have adapted the data-collection strategies according to the different conditions that we as researchers met in the respective countries, as our overall ambition was to find informative data. For example, in comparison to Estonia, where the interviews were carried out in places selected by the youths themselves, Swedish focus groups were carried out in schools. Although the school context might potentially constrain children's answers, our impression was rather that sitting with a small group in a specially chosen room and discussing something they found interesting made them willing and eager to speak.

We are also fully aware of the two notable limitations of this study. First, our relatively small and homogeneous sample did not allow us to differentiate between the tweens on the basis of their socio-demographic background, ethnicity, etc. Future studies are needed in that realm. Second, even though the interview method allowed us to study the self-reported perceptions of the tweens, we could only rely on the findings of our previous studies when evaluating the actual self-presentation practices of the young online. Nevertheless, we believe that a subjective understanding of the interviewees is interesting as such and should be regarded as one of the more important dimensions in deepening our understanding of how gender identities are constructed on SNS. We will also, within the framework of the GTO project [4], conduct an analysis of images published by tweens on different SNS. In addition, we acknowledge that the two SNS the tweens mainly referred to at the time of the interviews, Bilddagboken and Rate, differ in terms of both their technological interface as well as the overall operating principles behind the platforms. Despite the above-mentioned limitations, however, the study provides a unique overview of the perceptions of tweens in Estonia and Sweden, countries which differ in terms of their historical and cultural background, but that have many similarities in terms of Internet penetration rate and general online practices among the young (Livingstone et al, 2010).

Estonian and Swedish Tweens' Experiences of Writing Identity on SNS

The Estonian and Swedish tweens in our sample seemed well aware of contemporary heteronormative power differentials and identity markers, and they make use of them when writing their identity in their SNS interactions. We will elaborate on this further under the following three headings: 'The Influence of the (Peer) Culture', 'Reproduction of Heteronormative Power Structure' and 'Image Manipulation'.

The Influence of the (Peer) Culture

The contemporary culture, including both the specific cultural setting of the SNS and the peer culture in a broader sense, forms an important frame of reference for the re/construction of norms and values. In accordance with the findings of our previous studies (see Hernwall, 2009; Siibak, 2009b), the interviews with the tweens give reason to believe that they are aware of the expectations of their virtual peer group and very familiar with the visual trends dominating not just online communities but media culture as a whole. For instance, in the case of young Rate users, the tweens have perceived that the self-presentation strategies of the high-ranking users (e.g. members of different popularity charts in Rate like 'TOP 100 of the most remarkable men and women in Rate', 'TOP 100 of the most famous users', 'TOP 100 of the most popular dates', etc.) help to shape and form the collective consciousness of peer group norms and values prevalent on the site (see Siibak, 2009a).

It seems that someone with *feim* [5] is imitated because the photos are similar. I think that there are a lot of photos where girls are posing with a 'duck-face'. (Girl, 12, EE, i.e. Estonia)

I think that there are people who try to imitate others, those who do not have enough good ideas themselves but who would like to look more interesting, because there are thousands of similar photos. There are tons of photos where girls are making this 'duck-face'. (Girl, 12, EE)

In several respects the images posted by these high-ranking community members have a double role to play. They are viewed as a source of inspiration, but also as a point of reference against which one's own images are measured. Consequently, when making use of the trends apparent in the photos of top-ranking users and hence actively taking part of the (un)conscious struggle for the recognition of and acceptance by their peers, tweens are engaged in interpretative reproduction (Corsaro, 1992) of norms and values present in the community.

The interviews further indicate that specific visual self-presentation strategies and posing techniques are favoured among the tween users of online communities. For example, the interviews with tweens in both countries imply that taking photos of oneself so that one's reflection is visible through a mirror is a popular way of posing on the profile images. In order to take a photo of this kind, the young have mainly made use of mirrors in the privacy of bathrooms or bedrooms – that is, in locations where they can pose and exhibit themselves without the possible intrusion of parents (see Hernwall, 2009). This blurring of the private and the public (see Bordo, 2003) is perhaps one of the most prominent features of SNS use.

Interviewer: Bathroom images are classic ...

Boy 2: Yes, I have seen it.

Boy 1: If one does that, you will probably get comments.

Boy 3: But yes. Well, it is not the way we boys... of course, they exist.

Interviewer: But you have not done it?

Boy 3: No.

Boy 2: Oh No, hell no! [*Laughs*].

(Interview 3, Boys, 14, SE, i.e. Sweden)

As the extract above indicates, the most common ways of posing are gender specific. The male users of Rate also emphasised in the interviews that taking self-made photos through a mirror was not that popular among boys.

Other popular posing strategies, which allow creativity but at the same time demand more of it, are primarily used by the girls. For example, it is common to find photos of girls with face paintings (e.g. cat, tiger, etc.) as profile images on Rate and Bilddagboken, whereas no similar self-representational style can be found in the boys' images.

I think that there are very many photos in Rate where just the face of a person is visible. And such photos where an eye-liner has been used to draw cat whiskers and nose on the face.

(Girl, 11, EE)

In the descriptions of the most typical images found in SNS, the tweens eagerly elaborated on the trends that they had perceived as leading to popularity. For instance, the tweens consider that the typical images in a Rate community demonstrate vanity, as profile owners often take the opportunity to pose, either with expensive accessories or with sexy looks and trendy clothing. Furthermore, girls from the Estonian sample have noticed that sexy and provocative profile images of girls receive more flattering comments as well as more positive attention from male users of the site. Hence, the tweens have noticed that many young girls on the SNS also try to gain attention by exhibiting their sexuality – for example, by emphasising their breasts, by making 'duck-faces' or by wearing provocative clothing.

The usual Rate photo shows vanity. Someone is either showing off or flaunting some expensive thing. There are a lot of sexy photos. But photos definitely need to be sexy in order to catch the eye. Girls who pose in a provocative manner are more popular of course. (Girl, 12, EE)

The most popular photos must be those where girls are scantily dressed and their boobs are pushed up. (Girl, 10, EE)

Obviously traditional norms and values about attractiveness and femininity are being reproduced online in a stereotypical fashion (or, in the expression of Nakamura, 2002, as cybertypes).

Reproduction of Heteronormative Power Structure

The influence of the peer culture makes social interaction on SNS an arena for both the construction and the negotiation of power structures. In the interviews with Estonian and Swedish tweens, there is a very conscious decision behind what photos to use for presenting oneself on an SNS. In this process, power differentials and identity markers play a prominent role as the user is aware of the presence of the judging eye (see Mulvey, 1975) of the other.

I upload those profile images that will catch the eye, even if only for a while. I consider the photos to see if the images show me looking the way I want to look. Normal, I mean. There are so many images that sometimes it is quite difficult to find a photo that I really want to upload. (Girl, 10, EE)

... one has to choose the best ones [images]. (Interview 1, Boy 1, 14, SE)

The 'best' images, however, according to the perception of the tweens, are those where the person on the photo could be described as 'cute'.

In Rate I upload the photos that I myself like the most. I have one photo where I have fair-coloured extensions, my lips are suspiciously shrunken, and I'm wearing a pink top. Actually it looks very fierce, a bit like my favourite Barbie. Those fair-coloured extensions and the pink clothing make me so cute. Cute-meter is up to the roof. And that is also the reason why I chose this photo, as it is the most normal from my photo; at least I liked it the most. (Girl, 11, EE)

Boy1: I have published an image from when I was a kid and where I had rather long hair.

Interviewer: Why did you choose that one?

Boy1: 'Cos it's cute. (Interview 1, Boy 1, 14, SE)

The interviews indicate that the understanding of what is considered 'cute', however, is in constant flux and depends not only on the age and gender of the person but also on the peer culture of the specific online community. Although boys in our sample claimed to aim at posting 'cute' images of themselves, the analysis of interviews suggest that they also tend to worry about looking 'too cute' or posing in a manner which might be considered 'unmanly'. The interviews with boys indicate that there is a strong heterosexual norm prevalent in the online interactions in both Estonia and Sweden. In their online practices, the boys in both countries are affected by the fear of being considered 'gayish'.

One month I uploaded totally strange photos. I took a photo of myself through the mirror and uploaded it. But I'm not making photos of this kind anymore. These are too gay-ish, if I look at them now. (Boy, 12, EE)

Visual self-presentation strategies were also related to the age of the user. This was emphasised especially by Swedish boys when using the patronising term *fjortis*, that originally was used to refer to age (fourteen), but now is mainly used as a term to describe a specific way of looking, dressing and behaving of a person who is considered to be childish and a wannabe at the same time.

Interviewer: Why do you take a photo in the mirror?

Boy4: I don't know, it was a long time since ...

Boy3: But you know, it was when he was a bit 'fjortis'.

(Interview 1, Boys, 14, SE)

Besides sexuality and gender, the interviews with Swedish tweens revealed that their self-presentation strategies were also framed by the cultural and ethnic values prevalent in the society. For instance, referring to the large immigrant community of Turks in Sweden, the tweens have coined a racial comment which emphasises the negative attitude towards Turks in order to illustrate a certain way of posing among the boys.

Interviewer: How do the typical boy-images look? You are boys, what kind of images do you publish?

Boy1: The ones that are cute

Boy3: Like this [Laughs]

Interviewer: So you pose with your hand on your cheek?

Boy4: A bit hobby-Turk.
(Interview 1, Boys, 14, SE)

Gender, sexuality, age and also ethnicity are used as markers in the re/production of norms and values among the Estonian and Swedish tweens interviewed for this study. Obviously, these are not norms or values created either among the tweens or on the SNS, but rather are power differentials and identity markers prevalent in the contemporary society and reproduced by the tweens in their writing of identity. An important phase in this reproduction process is that of the manipulation of the images used.

Image Manipulation

In the manipulation of images published on the SNS the subject is constructed. This making of the subject can be done in (at least) two ways – first, by posing in front of the camera, and second, by Photoshopping or in the post-production of the photo taken. Besides uploading only their best photos, the interviewees claimed that they usually do not hesitate to use photo-processing software in order to manipulate the photos so as to present themselves in a more favourable light – for example, by cutting some people out of the photos.

At first I definitely take a look at myself and how I look. Then, who else is on the photo? Other stuff is not that important, if this is my profile, then I myself need to look good. How else is it possible? Well, I don't upload any photo with other geeks on it. Or when some bitch is around. I generally cut out the unnecessary things and upload a photo where I am dominating.
(Girl, 10, EE)

The interviews with Swedish tweens indicate that photo manipulation is mainly practised by girls, and far less often by boys, who tend to use photo manipulation tools just for the fun of it and not with the intention of publishing the photos on online community sites. Our previous analysis on the topic does confirm the trend (see Hernwall, 2009, 2010; Siibak, 2009b). In contrast to the boys, however, the girls are both more interested in the activity as well as more experienced in using the tools.

Boy1: They [girls] edit.
Boy2: Yes, THEY edit.
Boy3: Black-and-white sometimes.
Boy1: ... it is more girls than boys who take photos that are challenging.
(Interview 3, Boys, 14, SE)

Although in comparison to Bilddagboken, the rules of the Rate website do not favour photo manipulation, the practice is still very common and popular among the users. Previous research (Siibak, 2009b) has also implied that 'tuning the photos', as tweens call the process, is considered to be a crucial skill in order to raise one's popularity among one's peers. The interviewees also confessed the need for 'tuning' as it helps to make the profile owner appear to be 'more beautiful and cool' (Girl, 10, EE). Hence, it could be claimed that photo-processing skills illustrate a specific knowledge which is shared as well as developed within the youth community. This is a skill that is developed with age, and through that, new aspects of digital competence are added. However, it is even more interesting to note that this digital skill seems to be gendered, as it is primarily girls who practise it (Hernwall, 2010).

Conclusions

The trends described by Estonian and Swedish tweens in our study correspond to the findings of our previous analysis of images published on SNS (see Hernwall, 2009; Siibak, 2009a,b, 2010). On the one hand, the tweens seem to combine the markers of their personal everyday lifestyle when constructing their visual self-representations. In that case, the profile images can be viewed as creative personifications of a profile owner, with an emphasis on the aspects the person considers to be important or characteristic of her/himself. On the other hand, as Mikkola et al (2008) found, the ways males and females are represented in contemporary media serve as significant role models

for the tweens. As the young try to imitate the posing strategies and facial expressions seen in traditional media, the photos tweens use for visual self-representation could be perceived as a reflection of the social ambiguities, especially about maturity and gender, that the young encounter daily. The interpretations of womanhood by the girls hence not only involve wearing make-up (especially lip gloss and eye liner) and extensive accessories, but also include the style of posing and the facial expressions. At the same time, the boys seem to pay attention to posting not-too-cute-looking images of themselves, for fear of being considered feminine (gayish) or childish (*fjortis*). Thus, in comparison to the girls, boys seem to get inspiration from famous athletes, rather than from cute-looking pop stars. Young people's practices of constructing a gender identity on SNS can therefore clearly initiate two different assumptions about present-day childhood – 'whether we see this as a corruption of childhood or as means of cultural liberation for children clearly depends on how we conceive childhood in the first place' (Buckingham, 2009, p. 131).

The influence of the peer culture is one of the main sources of inspiration for the tweens in their creation, or writing, of the online body-self. Craving for acceptance BY one's peers is an obvious driving force behind the social interaction on SNS, as in any other interaction. When writing their identity on an SNS, the tweens are involved in an interaction not just towards the others present in the community, but also towards themselves and the construction of their personal identity. In terms of constructing and reconstructing one's gendered identities, being cute is considered to be an important aspect forming the overall value standard among the young. Compared with the girls, who seem to share a strong need to earn the acceptance and recognition of their peers through emphasising their looks, the boys do not appreciate being labelled as looking cute.

For tweens on the brink of adolescence, the possibility of constructing and reconstructing the appearance of the body-self on SNS is beyond doubt an opportunity to gain a deepened understanding of the norms and values of the contemporary society in which they are growing up. Furthermore, considering the fact that, according to Prout & James (1997, p. 7), the nature of the institution of childhood lies in 'an actively negotiated set of social relationships within which the early years of human life are constituted', our findings suggest that SNS offer the members of the digital generation a platform where 'childhood is both constructed and reconstructed both for the children and by the children' (Prout & James, 1997, p. 7). Despite their young age, the young interviewees pay attention to cultural norms and values on gender, sexuality, age, and, in some instances, ethnicity. Hence, these power differentials and identity markers are also reproduced by the tweens in their SNS interaction. The latter can be most explicitly visible in the manipulated images, and in the ways the young pose for the camera. Even though both the boys and the girls seem equally aware of how to look and pose on their photos, the girls seem to have greater interest in and knowledge of the post-production of images. In this, the girls are developing a kind of digital competence seldom mentioned by (or seen among) the boys in the study. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, rather than demonstrating a deterministic approach being taken towards technology, our findings illustrate the importance of social relationships constructed around the new technology that would enable the tweens to realise their own creative or educational potential.

In their writing of identity on SNS, Estonian and Swedish tweens in this study seem to reproduce generally accepted values and norms in terms of how the body-self is presented. At the same time, they develop different kinds of skills in relation to the use of the digital media, where the post-production of images seems to be a competence first and foremost practised by the girls – a competence that also mirrors a higher degree of reflection on identity as well as on what they strive for, while the boys tend to be more aware of what not to be.

Being a tween means existing in an age of rapid change in relation both to biological development and to cultural expectations. Taking this into consideration, it would be of great value to follow a group of young people in a longitudinal study, to observe how these gendered identities grow (and hopefully get challenged). Furthermore, future research should consider the interplay between the so-called on- and offline worlds in relation to how gender is performed among tweens. Here it would also be possible to take a more active role as researchers, practising action research and conducting workshops with young people to study the possibilities of challenging present norms by using the affordances of SNS to overcome the positioning of the physical body.

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Notes

- [1] Rate.ee started out as an Estonian-speaking equivalent to 'Hot or Not', revolving around voting and rating of the most beautiful friends, users and celebrities.
- [2] During the spring of 2011 Bilddagboken.se changed its name to DayViews.com.
- [3] 'Categorization' is used instead of category 'when the social and communicative process of 'categorizing' is to be emphasized' (Lykke 2010, 201).
- [4] The research project 'Construction and Normalisation of Gender Online among Young People in Estonia and Sweden' (2009-2011). See also <http://mt.sh.se/GTO>.
- [5] Rate users who have the highest popularity ranking among the community, i.e. they are the most famous users on the SNS.

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