PLAYFUL EMBODIMENT: BODY AND IDENTITY PERFORMANCE ON THE INTERNET

Edgar Gómez and Elisenda Ardévol
Mediaccions Research Group, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

The body is the Lazarus of cyberculture studies— everybody is sick of seeing it around, but it just won't die. (Lisa Nakamura, 2006)

Introduction[1]

In recent years the exponential growth of digital visual devices and the proliferation of Internet technologies that allow easy sharing of images and videos has resulted in an explosion of visual representation practices, some of which are new visual modes of identity performance not previously found on the Internet. This article analyzes the practice of 'self-presentation' based on posting photos of one's own body using different Internet technologies. The discussion particularly focuses on the playful relationship established by individuals with their own bodies through these practices.

Early Internet studies dealt with the disembodiment and simulation possibilities that computer mediated interaction offered to individuals, pointing to disembodiment and anonymity as the keys to understanding online identity performance (Donath 1996). More recent publications, however, show that the disappearance of body traits was not the norm, and sex, age and race were important and meaningful elements of online

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interactions. Even though the body was not visually present in text based mediated inter-actions, elements of corporal identity were represented and social stereotypes reproduced in textual and graphic self-descriptions (cf. Wakeford 2004; San Cornelio 2008).

Recently, self-presentation through visual practices has spread across very differ-ent Internet technologies such as social network sites, video and photo repositories, and blogs, to the extent that the current situation is marked by mediated interactions in which individual identity traits (age, sex, race, etc.) are extremely visible, openly displayed and shared. Despite the fact that this self-disclosure was already achieved by textual descriptions and personal web pages, this process is now being carried out through visual elements with a higher degree of interaction and for many purposes (Marshall 2010). Far from being a simple exhibitionist practice, this public self-presen-tation using images of one's own body involves forms of self-expression and social inter-action in which individuals playfully engage in the performance of their self-identity.

From 'disembodiment' in online interactions…

Identity performance and its *mise en scène* in online settings[2] have been, together with virtual communities, the main topics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies, especially in the 'early days' of this growing field (Silver 2004). Although CMC and cyberculture studies (Bell 2001) may be categorized in different ways (Silver 2004; Wellman 2004), our analysis will focus on studies dealing with identity as their main subject. A review of the literature shows that some researchers have analyzed the construction of online identity within interactive systems (USENET, IRC, BBSs, MUDs, etc.) emphasizing identity as an achievement of social interaction. This approach can be traced back to the early stage of Internet studies[3] when this object of study was still an emergent field for scholars. Classic works such as those of Reid (1991), Stone (1991), Turkle (1995) or Rheingold (1993) and anthologies like those edited by Jones (1996, 1997) were pretty much framed in this approach. From this point of view, online social interaction leads to a kind of disembodiment of identity, where the self is shaped through a series of textual representations, a 'free from the flesh' self within the characteristics

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2   We do not argue that there is an independent or separate online identity. These kinds of distinctions could be complex and tricky since they may lead to dichotomies such as real/virtual, online/offline, a discussion that falls outside the limits of this article.

3   We are paraphrasing Wellman's (2004) discussion of the "three ages of Internet studies". In his view, these kinds of works would be part of the second age of the Internet. See also Silver and Massanari (2006).

of a metaphysical universe (Heim 1993)[4]. Some of these canonical studies pointed to the opportunities that cyberspace offered to 'labs of identity', a way of performing the postmodern subject (Turkle 1995) —or an 'identity moratorium' similar to the crisis of adolescence (Erikson, 1979). Other approaches, such as reduced social cues theory (Lea and Spears 1995), argued that online identity was a result of the possibilities for anonymity in a context of text-based interaction that does away with the basic identity cues (race, gender, age) 'printed' on the body, stimulating simulation and deception (Donath 1996). In both cases, the properties of the technology and the absence of the physical body in the interaction explain how and why people play with identity; as Slater phrases it, "to put the flesh on the texts" was achieved through imagination (1998: 114). As Elizabeth Reid pointed out in her early work on the IRC, "It becomes possible to play with identity. The boundaries delineated by cultural constructs of beauty, ugliness, fashionableness or unfashionableness, can be by-passed on IRC" (Reid 1991). In our own early fieldwork (Ardévol and Vayreda 2003; Gómez Cruz 2003), some informants explained that one reason for chatting was that they felt free to assume the appearance they wished. Reminiscent of Reid's and Turkle's arguments, this perspective also recalls the famous cartoon by Steiner, captioned "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog". A second stage of studies in this vein has revealed the importance of 'real' physical identity marks for Internet use and practices (Kolko, Nakamura and Rodman 2000; Nakamura 2002)[5]. 'Identity play,' however, was considered a consequence of disembodiment and anonymity, a carnivalesque experience of otherness, simulation and disguise.

The next step in identity studies came with the emergence of the World Wide Web. This second approach was more related to the iconic and audiovisual possibilities of the net. Compared to the textual interaction in the early Internet technologies mentioned above, self-presentation in personal webpages, for instance, seemed to provide more technical resources for uploading photos, hypertext and other technical features. Nonetheless, the presentation of self in personal webpages showed a more rigid and static use of the medium than more recent social networks. Among the scholars who study the online presentation of the self in websites are Miller (2000), Miller and Arnold (2001) and Chandler (1998). These studies noted that the function of photos in personal webpages seemed to be related to representational practices in which images of the body[6] served

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4   For an account of how the main concepts in Internet studies took the form of metaphors, see Gómez Cruz (2007).

5   Earlier work, especially in feminist studies, had already mentioned the need to take into account the question of embodiment in textual cyberspace (Hayles 1996; Sundén 2003).

6   When we refer to "body images" we have in mind all kinds of photographs in which the body appears. This broad definition includes portraits, probably one of the most common photos on the web.

primarily to represent the subject. The connection between body and identity was again firmly established, as well as the correspondence between online and offline personal identity. In webpage analysis the question of identity play seemed not to be an issue and, if present, identity play was still related to body disguise or creation of a persona.

…To 'fleshy identities' in social networks

As in the first CMC systems, communication based in textual interactions is still one of the main uses of the Internet. Nevertheless, the scenario for interaction, communication and identity performance has changed with the emergence of new technologies and platforms for social networks (cf. Boyd and Ellison 2007). In some of these platforms, the visual is fundamental and constantly gaining importance in terms of social interaction. Along with the ability to produce and distribute self-produced images, the everyday life and the body of the person who photographs have become some of the main photographic objects shared online. These new visual practices on Internet platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Tuenti or video and photo services like Youtube and Flickr have to be understood in combination with the widespread use and availability of digital recording devices (digital cameras, video cameras, camera phones, etc.)[7]. Visual objects provide a new and interesting element of computer-mediated communication in contrast to text-based online communication since:

> The camera as an active mass tool of representation is a vehicle for documenting one's conditions (of living, working and sociality); for creating alternative representations of oneself and one's sex, class, age group, race, etc; of gaining power (and the power of analysis and visual literacy) over one's image (Slater 1999: 290).

Thus, different ways of constructing sociability and identity on the Internet have been developed. Self-image has become a fundamental 'object' in social interaction through these new devices, merging different kinds of data and metadata to link people and create routines of sociability. In most cases, self-portraits are at the core of social interaction. For example, in the personal profiles of social networks such as Facebook, the body becomes again the basic artifact of cultural identity construction, and has once again become a crucial element of identity performance, but this time

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7   It is important to note that the reduced cost and general availability of image and computing technology, along with the ease of use and penetration of these systems in western countries, have helped ensure the success of these systems.

with the utilization of self-images in a playful way and in relation with other devices. Although some authors, such as Koskinen (2005) in his study on the use of the body in mobile technologies, argue that many of these bodily representational practices are in fact 'age-old' practices of ordinary society, the difference is that these 'old' practices now have immediacy and a variety of new elements to be developed for a wide range of people and purposes. For example, a self-portrait can be directly uploaded to the blog through a mobile phone in the very moment the photo is taken, and its purpose may vary from an interchange of funny photos between friends to updating the blogger's personal profile. These new practices of self-representation should be followed and studied from an anthropological viewpoint.

A second element for considering these new Internet devices and their related practices is that former chats, electronic forums, virtual communities, etc. were characterized as public spaces for interaction (Jones 1997). In that context, every user —except those people in charge of administering the collective 'space'— had the same rights and chances for public communication. In contrast with those systems, social networks and blog platforms open several possibilities for customization and 'personalization'. Blogs, for example, are owned and managed by an individual —or a small group of people— and the collective is built on the sum of these 'private' sites and their interrelations. Therefore, if in the "old" CMC systems, personal identity was constructed through sociability in common shared virtual spaces, now it seems to be occurring in different ways. In the new systems, sociability is the consequence of the 'consumption' of the personal identities performed online, mainly through personal blogs such as those in Blogger, Wordpress or Myspace, or through personal profiles like those in Facebook or Hi5. However, while in the 'old' systems such as IRC there was a lack of materiality (Slater 1998), in almost all current technologies there is an infrastructure that gives the user a 'digital materiality' in the sense that in blogs or Flickr and Youtube accounts, the address is fixed and permanent, and the content is managed by the owner. That is, the user profile is not only recognizable, solid and constant, but also deeply framed by a visual support, specifically photos, where self-portraits are becoming the key for self-presentation. In this sense, there is a 'return of the flesh,' an embodiment that, as Slater puts it:

> …actually does two things: it gives the other a fixed point or origin in space —an address— from which actions can be mapped, where responsibility for those actions can be traced; and it provides the kind of sensual delineation of the other and their presence that people come to treat as incontestable in everyday life (Slater 1998: 114).

This digital embodiment is increasingly permeating online communication and interaction practices and the identity of the subject is at the core of this process, blurring the possible differences between online and offline identity. People might use these network platforms as they used a personal webpage at an earlier time, for purposes of self-representation or self-expression, but also for social interaction, this time not in 'virtual places,' but in digital personal settings and using their actual names and filiations. Blogs, for example, are themselves contexts for interactions between the owner and other users. People are allowed to link them, to contact the owner, or to leave comments in their posts regarding photos or videos that have been published. Self-identity is performed through combining different formats: photo, text, audio and video. It is also quite common to find people who merge different kinds of devices such as Flickr badges embedded in blogs, photologs mixed with SMS messages and so on, mixing up different contents (self-produced or grabbed from the Net)[8]. But these person-centered or "me-media"[9] dimensions involve a radical dichotomy between the media 'owner' and the rest of the users, a displacement of the role that other people have in the context of interaction. They become 'audience', 'readers', or 'watchers' of other's texts, images and videos, and the practice of one's identity construction becomes the object of others' consumption (Bauman 2005). As Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner point out regarding consumer culture:

> Within consumer culture the body is proclaimed as a vehicle of pleasure: it's desirable and desiring and the closer the actual body approximates to idealized images of youth, health, fitness and beauty the higher its exchange-value (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991: 177).

Bauman (2007) takes this argument further when he suggests that in contemporary society, the ultimate consumer object is the person him/herself. As Marshall reminds us in his analysis of celebrity culture, "The production of the self implies the mutability of the production process, as it is built from the array of possible forms of consumption and expression that these types of consumption provided for the individual" (2010: 36). In most blogs and photologs, the body is not only the representation of the person, but the object of transformation through online interaction, and

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8   This merging is increasing and becoming more mobile since the cell phone has increasingly become a key device for the use of all these sites.

9   "Me-media" is a concept taken from Simon Garfield that combines the broadcast possibilities of massive distribution with these personal contents and subjects on the Web. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/nov/16/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-social-networking.

ultimately, the main consumer object, as we will see in one of the blogs we have chosen as an example, "I am body" (*Yo soy cuerpo*).

While 'authentication' —in search of fame and success— is a goal for many people using these platforms, the elements of self-presentation are displayed in a playful, supposedly controlled and performative way (Butler 1993). This action is performed many times and by many people using their own body images as a commodity, which means that other users, with their comments, number of visits and personal messages and exchanges with the owner, make sense of the practice in a traceable way that is more evident, for example, in the case of nudity photos. From this perspective, identity is performed not only as a result of constant social interaction, as was the case with the textual CMC systems, or as a *bricolage* of self-representation activity on webpages, but as a practice in constant flow between representation, interaction and play, where heterogeneous elements are brought together. In this new scenario, the corporeal becomes a fundamental element for identity performance. The body is taken to the Internet by the constant upload of pictures and videos, and consequently the subject's identity is performed through the online and offline communicative modes. Therefore, the success and fame on the net of the 'embodied self' turns out to be the key feature of this new game as opposed, for example, to the anonymity of the participants in a chat.

At the same time, these practices of body display seem to have the implicit goal of 'trapping' followers and creating social bonds, as Miller observes in his study of Trinidadians' webpages (Miller 2000). Going beyond the metaphor of the stage in the "presentation of the self" (Goffman 1959), corporal images and the bodies themselves are taken as the key elements for self-identity play. This play becomes a never-ending game (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2003; 2005) in what we have called the 'playful embodiment' of online identity performance; that is to say, a practice that combines the performative and theatrical possibilities of online interaction —already studied in CMC— with media displays of digital images, specifically those of people's own bodies. Both producers and consumers of this visual material take part in this playful relationship with the body.

A key issue in theories of play is the relationship between play and daily life. Identity play on the Internet has been usually understood in Huizinga's terms. This author refers to 'the magic circle' as a metaphor to explain the separate temporal and spatial spheres of play, relating it to the ritual dimension of culture, in opposition to everyday life. In the separation between online and offline identities that appeared to characterize the early stages of the Internet, the body was considered absent or "fully malleable" (Whittle 2001), and identity play was a matter of imagining alternative selves in a separate 'space': cyberspace. While influential early works like Huizinga's

linked play to ritual and cultural drama (Turner 1986), later contributions (see, for example, Silverstone 1999: 63) consider play as a 'core activity of everyday life' and central to media experience. In this respect, control over representations of one's own body on the Internet is closely related to the notion of embodiment in new media practices such as videogames, a source of pleasure and play. In these interactive environments, embodiment goes beyond voyeuristic pleasure and vicarious identification with representations (Lahti 2003). Performing self-identity through body representations in online interaction may be experienced not only as a pleasurable and playful media activity, but as a kind of self-exploration and self-transformative practice that is embedded in, not separated from, everyday experience. As Avgitidou points out concerning self-portraits, "in the context of autobiography, it is a self-exploration as much as it is a self-representation" (2003: 13) and, as we shall see in our case studies, personal blogs, as well as user profiles, are closely related to autobiography.

The idea that play can involve both transgression and transformative practices has been widely explored and can be found in the work of Avedon and Sutton-Smith, *The Study of Games* (1971) or in Victor Turner's anthropology of experience (1986). Although we are aware that the relationship between body and self-identity may also be approached analytically through theories of gender and sexuality, the goal of this paper is to describe the playful uses of embodiment we have identified in our empirical research on current digital media practices, specifically those related to identity performance in blogs and photo-based weblog services.

Methodology

The results presented here are based on three case studies of different practices in which people engage with visual representations of their bodies to perform their identity on the Internet. We focus particularly on the visual possibilities of technologies where the use of photography is key, and the body is one of the most important objects of photographic practice. Our methodological approach draws upon theories of practice understood as a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood (Reckwitz 2002: 250). Our approach to photography as a social practice follows that of Elisabeth Edwards (2008). We propose that body images on the Internet are used not only as a representation of the subject, but as a way to perform self-identity in a playful way and as material objects of exchange in social interaction.

In this exploratory study, we conducted an observation in two different techno-
logical platforms: Blogspot and Fotolog[10]. We chose these systems because they have
in common the use of both images and text (although one is more text-based and the
other is more based on photos). Nevertheless, our goal was not to study the platform
itself, but users' practices. We looked for blogs and photoblogs of Spanish-speaking
users where an important part of the content was the author's photos of him or herself.
For this paper, we chose two blogs and a photolog as case studies. Since our goal was
to identify common practices of people using different Internet devices for playing
with their body images as a way to perform their identity, these three cases provided
contrasting examples. This online observation was complemented by interviews with
the authors of the different blogs analyzed.

Although the results we present are preliminary, we believe they are highly
suggestive not only of the growing importance of body images related to identity
performance, but of the ludic component in these practices. 'Showing off' on the net
through self-representation, playing with one's own body as a represented object and as
an object of representation, self-presentation as spectacle, and the relationship of these
practices to traditional media are cultural phenomena and should be studied as such.

The case studies: Body-blogs and ego-shooters

In many blogs whose main topic is the author's everyday life, writing is combined
with the use of self-portraits and other personal photos used by the bloggers to present
themselves and to support personal memories, experiences or thoughts. There are
many blogs whose main topic is the body itself, such as exercise and body-building
blogs, which include exercise tips, diets, photos and tutorials, etc.; beauty-related
blogs discussing make-up, fashion, etc.; or sexually explicit blogs with people present-
ing themselves as models in blogs about intercourse and exchange of sexual partners.
All these blogs contain a considerable amount of photos, texts, comments and links
in which the body is the main content, and, in fact, the author's body is usually the
most relevant element. For our purposes, however, we were looking for blogs in which
self-identity was interwoven with body representations. We call these 'body-blogs' in
the sense that they are devoted exclusively to the body of the blogger, sometimes in
a very self-reflective manner. In this type of blog, the self-body relationship involved
several playful elements ranging from posed photos to quotations from poetry about

the body. We chose as examples two blogs whose authors openly state that their blogs are devoted entirely to their bodies: *En busca del cuerpo perdido*[11] (In search of the lost body) and *Soy cuerpo*[12] (I am body). Both are by Mexican authors, one female and the other male. These cases were selected because they represent an interesting and clear (almost extreme) example of a playful display of the blogger's own body as the primary object, as well as the social and interactive dimension of identity play. Moreover, one of the blogs had a large number of visits and both blogs are authored by people who defined themselves as artists during the interviews. Nevertheless, their blogs present personal and intimate content without defining it explicitly in artistic terms. For both, the experience of sharing photographs of their bodies was a way to play with their self-identities, to transform their subjective experience and their relationship with their own body. *VeronikA*, the fotolog account we chose to follow, is one that presents, among other photos, many self-portraits of the owner, but in this case there is no explicit desire for a transformative experience through body representation. In this case, self-portraits are a form of self-expression and, above all, a pleasurable way to make friends.

En busca del cuerpo perdido: The blog as the body

Yreal is a Mexican woman who describes herself as an artist interested in body and sexuality, both as personal artwork and as a form of self-exploration. In her blog, she talks about her daily life with special emphasis on her sexual practices. Her body is presented and used not only as a pretext but as the field of her thoughts, experiences and representations. She does this in a playful way with her audience, posting self-portraits, some naked, some in underwear, and sharing views about the body (hers and others') and her sexual life. She also posts photographs she has taken of other people, most of them nude. In one post, she claims: "We're immersed in words and we run away from the body. From sensations, from the action of what we are through people flowing inside the body." Her 'research' aims at body experiencing —"I'm where my body is"— and she uses the blog to put that statement on a kind of public stage where people (mostly, but not only, men) leave comments and encourage her to continue with her exploration. Yreal builds a blog just as she constructs her own body, performing, by means of the use of photos, texts, comments and interaction, the body as a playful

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11   http://yreal01.blogspot.com/
12   http://soycuerpo.blogspot.com/

object full of sensuality and coquetry. Sexuality and sexual norms are not only present on a regular basis in this blog as a reflexive subject, but also as a communicative exchange, as can be inferred from the way men tend to comment on her blog. She has a great number of followers, and has become a kind of 'celebrity' and a reference for this type of blog[13].

This blog is an example of three things. First, the performance of identity emerges from the blogger's own body, a playful embodiment achieved through the reflexive combination of visual and textual elements. Second, it exemplifies an aesthetic convergence between digital personal manifestations and the syntaxes of traditional media (in the use of poses, light, costumes, the digital treatment of the photos, and so on). And finally, it is an example of how the blog itself becomes a 'digital embodiment' of its owner through the display of images of her own body; there is a shared agency between the blog, the audience, and the person who created it. It is performative not only because she performs her identity through these routine practices, but because she recognizes her blogging activity as a performance in itself, as the transformation of her body into spectacle, almost as an art object. While some people have different embodiment practices in their search for social recognition (instead of celebrating anonymity), these systems can also be used in playful ways, not only to represent the self but also to perform self-identity for an audience.

Soy cuerpo: The blog as a body diary

Rafael, also Mexican, had been describing his diet, the amount of exercise he gets, his sleep time and his medications for 18 weeks when we contacted him. He posts this information every day, and every week, he posts nine photos of his naked body from the front, back, and both sides, plus one photo of his teeth and another of his feet (his body representation model recalls those of medicine or physical anthropology). In this way, readers can visualize the changes in his body, if any. Rafael presents his blog as he would present his body in a kind of artistic performance, but at the same time his body is photographed in accordance with a severely scientific aesthetic. He points out that he uses his blog as a way to 'restore' his material body in an ethereal medium (the Internet). Precisely because of the infrastructural elements of the blog that not only allow but require a scheduled organization of the information (a log record), his

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13   Some time ago, there were a couple of posts in Yreal's blog telling how a female copycat had posted in another blog a text originally published in Yreal's blog. A 'fan' of Yreal's blog warned her about the plagiarism and then, when the copycat was accused by the "community," she had to close her blog.

chronological display makes sense. In this way, the author makes playful use of the script inserted in the technological design. Rafael's blog is an extreme but clear example of the incarnation of identity in one's body using a digital medium. He relates to his blog as he relates to an artistic piece. When interviewed, he stated: "The thing with the performative action is that the body (oneself) is the base, and in that way, the display is more evident…this is characteristic of the performance, the body, the presence, 'real' space and time, my existence is this, one of the body."

His presentation, nonetheless, is clearly playful since his body is always photographed in the same position and the evolution of this 'body reconstruction,' based on his daily regimen of diet, exercise and medication, is made public and commented on by the people who read it.

At the same time, the blog functions as a 'historical mirror' of this body-shaping process. Rafael says that the blog is part of his relationship with 'getting in shape' and, ultimately, with his own body. The 'materiality' of the blog lies not only in the fixed and permanent address of the URL and the blog's name, but also in the way its periodicity and content (text and photos) constantly refer to Rafael's body, thus supporting his identity.

Rafael plays with his blog in two ways: first, he establishes a playful relationship with his body that is displayed as a public 'body-diary;' second, he plays with his audience, because he does not explain that, for him, this exercise is planned as an 'artistic' experience, in the sense that he is experimenting with his body using the blog as part of the performance. In this way, people can observe his body development as a routine, and sometimes they cheer him on with comments about his improvement and the way he really seems to be losing weight (which he doesn't seem to do).

In both cases, the blog is used as a public performance in which the identification of the authors by their birth names, professions, educational level, etc., and especially their embodiment as defined by their body images and nudity, along with the intimate details they write about, constitute playful instruments for self-transformation. In both cases they are fully aware of their artistic approach to the object, and their blogs represent an extreme example of playful embodiment practices. While different, they share the centrality of the body image and a certain theatricality[14] in playing with technological devices. In these blogs, the focus and content is centered on the body. The body is at the centre of the technological mediation, the images and the relationship with the public/audience.

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14   These two blogs are clear examples of performative actions understood in an almost artistic sense. The authors 'perform' and have a sense of an 'audience.'

Fotologs: The ego-shot and its nuances

Fotolog.com is an Internet service defined as a "website that allows you an easy way to put all your digital photos on a web page in chronological order and a daily format." The service is free, and a free account allows users to post one, and only one, photo every day. A payment option available for $45 per year offers the users the opportunity to post six photos every day, and several other options not available in the free accounts. Publishing photos on a daily basis is a fundamental category in how its designers define Fotolog: "anyone can express him/herself every day." The organization of images is chronological, and the 'daily update' is a widely used option; in this way, the service generates practices that are in accordance with its design. Fotolog is also defined as "a global network that is always evolving, where members communicate and connect through photographs." It organizes the directory of its members according to two categories: their geographic location, and the topic of the groups they belong to, such as "people and bodies," "arts and culture," "sports," etc.[15].

Each user has his/her personal page, on which the most recently published photo is displayed. As one of the interviewed users describes it, "You enter [Fotolog] and you are already seeing your photos, the texts attached to them, your commentaries, your friends and the most recent photos." The users' practices are very diverse, as are the updating times (which vary from those who post only a few photos per month to those who publish images every day) and the topic of the fotolog. In this case, our fieldwork was framed by two analytical categories that allowed us to organize the diversity of practices on the site: the topic of the fotolog and the object of the images; and the regularity of publishing practices. We selected people who had been publishing every day (or almost daily) for at least six months, and post photos of themselves. Here we examine the Fotolog page of Veronica, a 24-year-old journalist for a Spanish digital newspaper.

The artistic quality of the images varies remarkably from one user to another, but in spite of the simplicity that gives an impression of a trivial practice, choosing the photographs to be uploaded is actually a very reflective practice on the part of the users. Not all the photos work, explains Veronica. Some images are specifically 'Fotolog photos': those are "graceful" images, photos "that say something." Veronica explains how, in conversation with friends she has met through Fotolog, they

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15   In 2008 the site announced that there were 10 million accounts and 282 million images circulating through the service; 15 million separate users visited the site every month, according to data published on the site. Today, it is clear that many people have migrated to other sites such as Facebook or Tuenti, but Fotolog is still the most important social network based primarily on self-portraits.

sometimes easily identify the 'right' images: "this is a Fotolog photo!". During the interview, Veronica explained, "I have already spent two days trying to update it, but I can't find any photos." During the interview she showed other photos saved in her camera: "I wouldn't put this photo in Fotolog, for example, that photo of a pose of… it doesn't say anything in Fotolog." Choosing the 'right' photo is a practice learned through a process of socialization in the Fotolog system: "at the beginning, maybe you publish anything, but soon…. It is not publishing for the sake of publishing… you become more demanding; you do not upload just any picture, now I do so much less." One example of these 'Fotolog pictures' is the 'ego-shot.' Ego-shots are casual self-portraits made usually with arm-length shoot or using a mirror or something that can reflect one's own image. Typically, in an ego-shot the camera's reflection is also visible. Ego-shots appear to be a genre originating in the Fotolog sphere, where there are groups exclusively devoted to sharing ego-shots. While in the examples above self-portraits were made for an unknown audience, in the Fotolog case, they are intended to be shared with other Fotologgers.

The photos are made with the aim of sharing them with others, with friends. They are the material with which to assemble the social. Through the circulation of images, social bonds are constructed and maintained. The comments, which may seem trivial, extremely brief and sometimes obscure to those outside the social circle of the Fotologgers, are fundamental to the authors' practices: "When I see that they comment on mine (Fotolog account), I comment on theirs, and when I see that they do not comment on mine, I don't comment on theirs," says Veronica.

Daily publication is a category that defines Fotolog practice. In the interview, Veronica explains that this daily practice involves not only posting pictures, but visiting the site: "it is like being, waiting… to see if it has been updated…, to see what photo has been removed. I don't know, it is like different, it is very day-by-day, the fotolog," Veronica says. This daily practice is fundamental for the construction of the social through these devices. The construction of social bonds is based on regularity. "Something that hooks up very much," says Veronica, as she explains her difficulties in getting some of her friends to use Fotolog, arguing that "they do not have the everyday contact with Internet, haven't got that thing of putting themselves in front of the computer, they are not hooked up to the Internet." It is partly through this regularity that Fotolog practice becomes integrated into more extensive practices of Internet use, that it becomes imbricated with the everyday lives of users and their friends, even those who are not themselves Fotolog users.

Photoblogs, like blogs, constitute different kinds of playful practices using the owner's bodily image. Although there are photoblog accounts and groups devoted

exclusively to body parts (nails, hands, eyes, and feet) what is surprising is the role of body image in the constitution of the user's identity as a 'Fotologger.' These photos are used as a device for communicative interaction with other Fotologgers, especially with friends and known people. This means that the image, with a strong body presence, is one of the key elements in personal and collective identity construction. In this case, the performative action is less centered on the body itself and more on the playful use of other elements such as poses and backgrounds. Fotolog is becoming increasingly attractive to young people who use the platform not only to support their social bonds but also to sustain a network that is sometimes based on body exhibition in semi-naked photos or in sexually suggestive photos. These photos, like the ego-shots, are made mainly to be shared, as the social glue for togetherness and recognition, a kind of play between peers.

Discussion

Internet-mediated social interaction, from textual chats to photologs, has brought about an explosion of visual elements. The present trend seems to integrate more and more visual material as part of the communicative exchanges on the Internet. We have argued that these visual practices reinforce the relationship between body and self-identity, introducing a transformative play between them and challenging the conception that body equals a stable and fixed identity.

In the 'body-blogs,' the representation of the body is closely related to an artistic use of the body. In the first example, the blogger's body is transformed through its relationship with the blog, and through that regular practice, she seeks to experience herself as a body. In the second example, the body is explored through blog photos and narratives as a way of performing a sensual identity before an audience, but also as a way of experiencing a subjective transformation of bodily experience. In both cases, self-reflexivity about the relationship of body and identity is actively staged for an audience in a playful way. By contrast, in photoblogs, the performance of identity through body images is related to identity construction through social interaction, where body image plays a key role as an object of social interchange. Veronica is not an actor staging a performance for an audience, but her body images are shaped by other Fotologger practices, through a socialization process among peers. Achieving the Fotolog aesthetic is a way of performing her new Fotolog identity through the sharing of playful images of herself.

Identity performance in blogs and social networks increasingly involves a strong visual element. An increasingly common practice is to take photographs of the body and upload them on the Internet as part of the presentation of the self. The body seems to have become a digital-material playground for identity performance. In that sense, it matters not only as a 'return of the flesh' in online interaction but as a growing practice that raises several important issues related to privacy and public practices, control, and self-affirmation.

This embodiment of the subject on the Internet occurs in a playful way, using the possibilities of digital treatment of images, posing and inter-textual references, or placing the images in interrelated contexts. What seems at first to be a trivial practice is far from being so, and self-portraiture has turned into a common set of practices related to body and identity performance. We have called this set of different and interlinked media practices 'playful embodiment.' This practice of performing self-identity through playful embodiment is one that, by establishing an intricate techno-social matrix, appears to have become an important element in the generation of social bonds. These social bonds, based on regular site visits and exchange of playful body images, resemble traditional mass media practices to the extent that they share an important characteristic: the constitution of an 'audience.' Therefore, the temporal syntaxes of these digital systems, as well as the visual design, are closely related to traditional mass media practices. Our analysis of the case of Fotolog reveals a new element: the use of body images as objects of sharing and exchange among peers. An additional characteristic of this kind of identity play is that site owners abandon anonymity and disguise in favor of using their real names and images of their own bodies for known and unknown audiences and for creating and maintaining relationships that go far beyond the Internet.

The notions of play and playfulness constitute key concepts regarding practices in new media (Kücklich and Fellow 2004). This argument has been developed through the intersection between videogames and new media theoretical approaches (Aarseth 2003; Jones 2006; Roig et al. 2009) but the relationship between embodiment and play developed in these studies (e.g. Lahti 2003) has not been applied to identity play in online interaction research. Our seemingly heterodox approach has allowed us to pay special attention to the notion of play in online identity performance as a way to explore embodying practices through different Internet technologies, and how these practices are related in different ways to Internet technologies in the production of subjectivities. The results discussed here represent the initial phase of a research agenda with a dual aim. First, in order to analyze how identity play is structured both online and offline, it is necessary to focus on the presentation of self in Internet settings in which interaction

and the creation of social bonds are grounded in the body and embodiment practices. Second, the study of digital identity practices must follow social actors in their complex relationships with their bodies, visual technologies, and the Internet.

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Abstract

This paper discusses practices related to the presentation of the body on the Internet. We focus on the relation between body and identity performance in online interactions, comparing identity play in the early stages of text-based Internet and in current multimodal networking technologies. We argue that, while earlier practices were characterized by playing on anonymity, people are now engaged in a "playful embodiment" process in relation to the production, diffusion and consumption of people's images of their own bodies through the Web. The empirical work is based on the analysis of Spanish and Latin American (photo) blogs that focus mainly on the body.

Resum

Aquest article analitza algunes de les pràctiques relacionades amb la presentació del cos a Internet. Concretament, ens centrem en la relació entre el cos i l'actuació de la identitat en les interaccions *online*, comparant els jocs d'identitat en les primeres etapes d'Internet basat en el text i la revelació de la identitat en les xarxes socials tot utilitzant les actuals tecnologies multimodals. Proposem que mentre el joc amb l'anonimat caracteritzava l'Internet textual, actualment trobem una "encarnació lúdica" del cos a Internet en el procés de producció, difusió i consum d'imatges del propi cos que la gent fa a través de la xarxa. El treball empíric es basa en l'anàlisi de blogs i fotologs espanyols i llatinoamericans que utilitzen el cos com el seu eix principal.