Home Sweet Instagram
Images of home and interior framing an online community

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Abstract

This thesis is focusing on a visual culture within Instagram where women display traditional western femininity through aesthetically pleasing images of homes and interiors. When observing this culture from a critical perspective, questions on normativity, gender and home representation together with the complexity of personal narratives come up. In an attempt to begin understanding the mechanisms and pleasures behind the use of Instagram this way, a small number of user interviews were made and analyzed towards representation, identity and feminist theory, and ideas around roles of photography, femininity, digital communities and material culture.

As a result of the study it could be claimed that images of interiors and homes are used as frameworks for a feminine culture where participants are creating a safe space in relation to other social network cultures. The space is used for remembering moments, being creative, developing skills and engaging in undisturbed social practice. Photography, interior design and the materiality of the home can also be seen as visual tools used to reflect on and create identities, at the same time as they are used for social positioning. Though faced with contradicting feelings, frustration about superficiality and concerns around privacy, it can be concluded that this refined practice of taking and sharing images, engaging socially and being creative is pleasurable enough for the users not to stop participating.

Key Words: Interior Design, Instagram, Personal Narratives, Personal Photography, Social Photography, Feminine Culture, Material Culture
# Table of content

Table of content.......................................................................................................................... 3
Introduction........................................................................................................................................ 5
Context............................................................................................................................................. 5
  Interior design ............................................................................................................................ 5
  Home and lifestyle in Swedish media .......................................................... 6
  The Instagram app....................................................................................................................... 6
Theory and existing research............................................................................................................ 7
  Research landscape .................................................................................................................... 7
  Penny Sparke – the home and interior as politics of taste....................................................... 7
  Liz Wells, Patricia Holland and Gillian Rose – a critical view at personal photography .......... 8
  Hall et.al – representation ........................................................................................................... 9
  José Van Dijk – the changeable digital image ........................................................................... 9
  Steph Lawler – identity through selection and narration ....................................................... 10
  Beverley Skeggs – using femininity as a tool ......................................................................... 10
  Summary ................................................................................................................................... 11
Data and methodology.................................................................................................................... 11
  Data collection ........................................................................................................................... 12
  Sample ...................................................................................................................................... 12
  Conduct ..................................................................................................................................... 13
  Data Analysis and presentation ............................................................................................... 14
Findings .......................................................................................................................................... 15
  The daily companion ............................................................................................................... 15
  Unloading all the images .......................................................................................................... 15
Analysis.......................................................................................................................................... 17
  The separate sphere of online culture .................................................................................. 18
  Aesthetic sanitization .............................................................................................................. 22
  Reasons for frustration ............................................................................................................ 26
  The practice of imagining home ............................................................................................. 27
  Identifying with the material home ....................................................................................... 29
  The images ............................................................................................................................... 30
  Stories and imagining yourself in them .................................................................................. 32
Memorandums or instant communication................................................................................... 33
Discussion............................................................................................................................................. 34
  Implementation and limitations to the project.................................................................................. 35
Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 36
References............................................................................................................................................. 37
Appendice............................................................................................................................................ 39
Introduction

For a few years I have through my own usage of Instagram seen how some groups of women in their thirties continuously display aesthetically attractive images from within or around their homes. A specific culture in both images and text has formed, and from my point of view as a feminist aware of gendered structures, I see a display of traditional western femininity being evident in how these groups produce images and communicate online. Questions on normativity, gender and family representation together with the complexity of personal narratives has continued to puzzle me at the same time as I myself have enjoyed participation in this online culture by following some of them closely, engaging in conversations and sometimes posting the same types of images.

To begin coming closer to understanding the enjoyments of using Instagram this way, the research questions have been the following:

- How is the concept of the normative family home used as self representation in this Instagram culture?
- How does this practice help these participants create meaning?
- What role does the digital photo play in this practice?

The approach to answering these questions has been to connect interview material with ideas on feminine material culture (Sparke 2010), to women’s practices of personal photography (Holland 1997) and ideas on identity (Lawler 2013) and contemporary digital visual communication (Tiidenberg 2015, de Laat 2008 and Van Dijk 2008). As a backdrop to all of this, the question of representation, here according to the theory of Stuart Hall (1997/2013) has been employed.

By this, the aim is to further nuance the field of research on feminine culture by addressing the trivialized adult and normative woman’s practices in visual social media from within, contrary to the much seen focus on todays younger and more norm breaking media user.

Context

Some general information and backgrounds are relevant to understand the setting of this study is presented in the section below.

Interior design

Beginning with the western industrialism, the workplace was slowly moved away from the home. With the middle class, home acquired a new character, the one of leisure and free time. It became a place for decorations and designed objects (Forty 2000, p100). In the mid to late 1800’s, interior beauty was of great significance, and if correctly done it represented a highly respected moral value, earning the women great respect. This engaged most middle and upper class women in the décor of their own homes (Forty 2000, 109). The rules to how it should be done in order to uphold beauty and fixed values were complex and called for instructional home décor literature, and simultaneously the first women also moved onto the profession of interior design (Sparke 1995, p28; Forty 2000, p111).
At the turn to the 1900’s, a handful of women worked with it professionally, mostly in the U.S. and England. Since then, it has been an established profession, even though the amateur’s décor and design of the own home has played the biggest part in the world economy. The woman as the household consumer has since then had a great role in an expanding market aimed at the development of home improvement, furniture, designed goods and leisure products. That same household consumer is the one we have been looking at here.

**Home and lifestyle in Swedish media**

Along with traditional interior decoration magazines, the interest for lifestyle and interior decorating, renovations and remodeling has been a trend in Swedish popular culture since the mid 2000’s. As an example, several shows about renovations, interiors and Do-It-Yourself on commercial TV started airing in the mid 2000’s (Nilsson 2008) and has continued since with great diversity. The amount of home décor magazines is steady, and editions for some are increasing when printed magazines in general are decreasing, according to Hanna Nova Beatrice, chief editor of Residence Magazine (interviewed on Dec. 17, 2015). Adding to that, interiors, lifestyle and materiality was performed and dissected in the Swedish touring humor show “Bright and Fresh” (My translation) during 2010 and 2011, featuring standup comedian and linguist Fredrik Lindström with comedian Henrik Schyffert. The material from that show also came as a book by the same name which strikingly uses both facts and laughs to pinpoint the middle class Swede’s obsession with the interior as a marker of a successful lifestyle (Lindström and Schyffert 2011).

To conclude, the Nordic home and interior has for the last ten years been added as a scene for media entertainment, and now also including Instagram as a media of its own, which could be useful as a background before further reading.

**The Instagram app**

Instagram, for those who do not use it, is a free social media mobile application with a purpose of photo-sharing. Unlike facebook there are no built in features to create special interest groups, making the navigation of the interface more difficult in terms of finding a niche. Some users get around this issue by creating several accounts catering to different interests - one for family, one for professional, one for art, one for the garden etc. To keep track on special interests either you follow someone, making their posts appear in your “feed”, or you search or follow hashtags (#interiordesign, etc). If that is not enough you can enter one of several pages which suggest what the rest of your community has liked, and just keep on scrolling to find something that you like. Generally there are lots of genres to find when browsing, which is how I first came across other people’s homes and interiors on Instagram. But, for scale it is important to know that the practice of sharing home pictures is not very common. In comparison, the most popular motifs for instagram users are not interiors, but friends, food, gadgets, pets, activities, memes and idioms, selfies and fashion (Hu, Manikonda & Kambhampati 2013).
Theory and existing research

Research landscape

In the field of media and communication studies, Instagram as a media and a practice has not been the object of interest for very long. The application itself has not been around longer than 6 years, starting up in October 2010 (Hu, Manikonda & Kambhampati 2013). Much of the material known to me after library-, scholar- and google searches is about commercial and public aspects of using Instagram for marketing or as a visual interaction tool for institutions such as museums or for public service purposes. There is also research on popularity, gratification, body looks and selfies linked to Instagram, something that could be relevant to my questions, but will be mainly left out since my focus will aim at using history of interior design and personal photography to better understand this practice.

When it comes to online communities that deal with image sharing there is far more research on other media than on Instagram per se. To spread all sorts of pictures online within the frame of a cultural group is not exclusive to Instagram but could be applied to applications such as facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, Google+, Pinterest and other, smaller blog networks alike. Research on all these should be interchangeable and useful for Instagram too, as long as taking in consideration any significant technical differences that affect behavior before making any assumptions or conclusions. As I am not interested in dissecting the particulars of the medium itself, I am confident that this approach when looking for corresponding or useful research in the field is sufficient.

From the vantage point of gender and feminism, photography and design history I see no major contradictions in the ideas and theories I’ve used as they all take the position that feminine practices both have been and still are marginalized. But there are some differences in how they view the future and which mechanisms we should apply in order to cope with prevailing structures, making for different angles to my end discussion.

When it comes to the newer research on digital photography, online activities and communication, the level of in depth material fluctuates some, as most of the material I have used comes from articles and not yet full length publications. But the discussion around the subject of online communities, communication and the media in general is alive, hopefully making this small study relevant and up-to-date within the media and communication field.

Penny Sparke – the home and interior as politics of taste

In trying to make sense of the image of the ideal home and the aestheticization of the interior, Penny Sparke is of use, providing both historical backgrounds and ideas on power structures, economy and self narration.

In trying to explain how and why images of the ideal home is still circulating, she starts with arguing that “the material and aesthetic culture of the home is both a mirror and embodiment of the values underpinning the ideal of feminine domesticity, that ideal also plays an active role in forming and reinforcing those values” (1995/2010, p xxiii).

Here, a study on “the meaning of things” from a western middle class perspective by Mihalyi Czikszentmihalyi (1981) has also been useful as it focuses on the home as symbolic environment. Though it is neither recent nor has a gender perspective it still brings valuable
records of feelings towards the materiality of home which can be used when analyzing both images and records. In relation to my research questions around why the aestheticized home can be such a central part of Instagramming, Sparke consistently acknowledges the significance that feminine taste has played in women’s lives (and the vitality it has brought and still brings into the economic world with the consumption of household goods) throughout all of modern history. She also discusses the struggle between feminine, domestic and mass cultured taste in relation to the more masculine, modern, public and artistic taste that prevailed as more legitimate up until the “death of modernism” in the late 60’s or early 70’s (where new and to be post modern movements is said to have loosened up traditional cultural dichotomies some) (Sparke 1995/2010, p 159). Unfortunately, the legitimacy of feminine taste and domesticity seems still affected by this heritage, and however driven and ambitious, activities concerning feminine taste are still trivial in comparison to a larger valued cultural program. From Sparke (1995/2010) it is the ideas of duality between the significance within the feminine culture and the insignificance from outside that I find interesting for my study, primarily since the practice of instagramming homes within this group seems completely void of masculine participation.

Liz Wells, Patricia Holland and Gillian Rose – a critical view at personal photography

Picturing life is the purpose of Instagram since it is a living feed of images displayed one at a time, assumed chronological and instant similar to Polaroids of earlier decades. When preparing for this study and talking to Instagram users in general about this, the images seem to be understood as representations of composite personalities, their whole lives, outcomes of their thoughts and ideas in the shape of digitally shared images and stories. To sort out misunderstandings like that surrounding the photographic seeing I have used texts collected in *Photography - A critical Introduction* by Liz Wells (1997), especially parts on the role of the photographic image as truth, and the family album in western culture (see below). The display and use of personal photography, or in this case domestic images has a long feminine tradition in the west, and as described by Patricia Holland in the chapter *Personal Photographs and Popular Photography* (Holland in Wells 1997), modern personal snapshots has been neglected by much research until the end of the 20’th century, mainly due to problems with personal context, domesticity and informality. At the time of the 1970’s those pictures will be elevated as evidence of neglected lives of women, minorities and the working class. From that time on, personal images will be recognized and used to fill those absences (Holland 1997 p 139), something that Gillian Rose does not agree to in *Doing family photography* where she lays out the scene for research on family photos as underdeveloped (Rose 2010).

The discussions on the role of the personal-, family- or domestic photography is of interest to this essay as it most often shows how the personal photography, just as the domestic and interior has been trivialized throughout the 20’th century due to their feminine connotations. Further, Holland also finds how a personal collection of photographs is used, not as a historian would, to discover truths of the past, but rather to reconstruct, recognize and set personal narratives in order to understand their own past. In that understanding the function of the personal photograph is to contain the “tension between the ideal image and the ambivalence of lived experience” (Holland 1997, p142). The ideal image here is the one that lives up to the conceptual expectations of what a personal picture should contain, and that is -
naturally the happy family memories that the amateur camera originally was created to capture. During early and mid twentieth century, adjacent to world wars and depression, focus on the re-building of economies included the family as a “force of reconstruction and social cohesion” (Holland 1997, p133). That family ideal was continuously documented by the amateur camera and was almost ritualized in documenting domestic moments (ibid, 134). Holland’s conclusion on personal photography at the end of the 1990’s is that it is “still a minor discourse, a knowledge without authority” (1997, p147) which was just being rediscovered as research subject by for example historians and feminists. Since then there has been a digital imaging revolution, and the personal pictures of the past are now sometimes spread in social media in a way that was probably not foreseen at the time. What I find useful is the historically domestic context joined with the trivialization of interiors and homes, especially the uses of them as a communicative online language.

**Hall et.al – representation**

Critical thinking when it comes to photographic imaging is of essence since there can be several aspects of how an image is created or experienced by the user, based on for example sociopolitical backgrounds. The experience of both seeing and taking pictures can be something fairly simple since it is something we in one way or another do daily, but when diving into the practices of how in this case an Instagram image is produced by the participants in this study, there is much more to it than just snapping and posting. In understanding this creation and experience of photographic imaging, the representational practice of encoding and decoding according to Stuart Hall with Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (1997/2013) is most useful. The belief that representation is context and culture-based in relation to sociopolitical powers, as previously stated, is the starting point for all arguments made in coming discussions.

**José Van Dijk – the changeable digital image**

Now, after the digitalized photographic evolution there is a belief that we have changed the way we take personal pictures, that the action itself is not one of saving and creating memories for the future but one of negotiating identity. José van Dijk (2008) argues that the personal photograph has almost fully undergone this change, but that it at the same time has kept its function as a memorandum for the future.

This brings questions about the changeability of the digital photo, the even less truthful truth of its appearance. Both in a sense that pictures are no longer just untruthful by arrangement and framing when taking the picture, but also by instant digital retouching - and in a sense that once the pictures are shared, they can come back to you, or anyone else, in a completely different shape than first intended (van Dijk 2008, p 71). For my purposes, the question of how the images change and what that means in a larger context or time span is not central - it is the moment of creation and that activity of memory-making that is of interest.

Van Dijk puts the finger on new media networking defining new contexts for the presentation of personal pictures. Online sharing becomes the default mode of a cultural practice that used to be much more private (ibid.). Additional valuable texts and studies on online behavior and image sharing are provided by Katrin Tidnenberg (2015) researching boundaries within online communities, De Laat (2008) looking at the uses of “public diaristic blogging”, a concept which could be just what is happening on Instagram, but in a compressed and smaller form,
and Amparo Lasén & Edgar Gomez-Cruz (2009) with ideas on the differences between public and private when sharing images over the internet. Though all of the above discuss more of a selfie- and body focused culture they are still useful in mapping out the landscape of digital and visual communication from an interpersonal and community perspective. In relation to above texts I choose to stress that the traditions and the modern practice is important to compare and juxtapose, as these participants all have one foot in the analog tradition and the other in the digital. The medium and alterations made possible through technology has changed but the fact that we still imagine domesticity and normativity is still there.

**Steph Lawler – identity through selection and narration**

Looking at Instagram from a narrative point of view also connects to sociological perspectives of forming identity, as discussed by Steph Lawler (2013) on the topic of stories, memories and ideas. The idea is to address the narrative as a tool with which identities can be shaped, adding dimensions when considering how the Instagram feed in itself is a visual and textual narrative, a kind of storytelling even though it has no overt beginning or end. Also the theories around identity not being one, but several within the same individual, shaping different identities depending on circumstance and need is of importance (which is similar in how sociology professor Beverley Skeggs, 1997, describes women using gender markers for different purposes). This negotiation is also something that is touched upon when reading about personal photography history, especially on the family album as a part of positioning yourself within a life-narrative (Holland in Wells, 1997). To complement Lawler’s sociology perspective, I have to a lesser extent also leaned on ideas on gender and identity in media by David Gauntlett (2008).

Lawler continues in discussing identity making from the perspectives of both Erving Goffman (on dramatic realization of ourselves) and Judith Butler (on bodies saturated with sociality), trying to explain the performance of for example, gender (Lawler 2008, p 116-137). Of interest to this study could be what happens when stepping out of line with norms, but probably more on what are the rewards when staying within them (Lawler 2014, p 116-137). When applied to the participation in groups in Instagram, this way of looking at performed self is useful when understanding what can be seen as one dimensional or shallow online display. I have chosen not to go into the original sources for either Butler or Goffman as they are cited and used in several of the texts I am already using.

Lawler’s identity perspective is quite explanatory which has been useful for my basic understanding, and at the same it is up-to-date both when it comes to new findings and current debates on for example identity politics and intersectionality.

**Beverley Skeggs – using femininity as a tool**

For feminist theory, touching on taste (such as the one of displaying taste in interiors) as an gendered identity marker I am using sociology professor Beverley Skeggs ideas on class and gender (1997). There are two perspectives useful in Skeggs texts, one is visual markers, and the other is actions. When it comes to visual markers, or style, the elements being markers for class and taste is discussed by Skeggs as an important part of forming gender. Her findings on how women actively or willingly are using and embodying stereotypical feminine markers selectively in order to gain relationship or community advantages or feel self worth (in many
perspectives) is of interest for this study since visual feminine stereotypes are a constant in many of these Instagram feeds (Skeggs 1997, p172). Secondly when it comes to belonging, performing and investing in femininity through behavior in order to achieve a feeling of comfort is very interesting in relation to the online rules described by the participants of this study. When knowing you lack power to change structures, economy and politics, femininity becomes a resource and a way to exercise power in culturally acknowledged ways (Skeggs 1997, p182) which can be a viable thought when understanding why femininity is reproduced within groups of other women. Looking at traditionally domestic feminine behavior as generally unquestioned and passing as uninteresting to hard public debate, and completely uninteresting for most normative men, the performance of femininity in this context can be seen as a key theme in understanding how and why these women stick to femininity on Instagram the way they do.

Though Skeggs generally explain the theater of femininity to be played out both through the currency of the body (looks and style) and actions (such as getting married, having kids) towards a viewer that is society in general (patriarchy internalized as well), I want to draw this further and focus on how the action of being married and having kids here manifests in visual imagery of the home and it’s interior. The main application of Skeggs ideas in this study is the general approach that femininity is something that might be rejected by women but still is used when found useful. Her ideas on the self reflexion and powers that lay within the individual vs. the constraints of political and societal structures have also been useful here.

Summary

Summarizing theory, I have chosen key ideas that fit my own perception of how behaviors and practices can be explained, mainly through theories on the negotiation of self towards bigger structures and cultural boundaries. I am mostly taking away ideas on identity as being flexible and selective, as those explain many of the markers and behaviors used within the study group. Photography from a critical standpoint brings with it to give agency to the engaging in personal and/or family photography, contrary to its history as being neglected or trivialized. The same goes for the ideas on women and material culture in the home, where these ideas are giving back power through those neglected and also explaining why domestic practices have such an importance. The reference work on representation brings with it the basic understanding of how representations are highly context reliant, amongst other things making it easier to keep a respectful approach when stepping into someone else’s visual culture, but also adding questions on how representations can be misunderstood and misappropriated outside of that context. The shorter texts have helped in adding contemporary media contexts and supporting with studies similar to this one but on adjacent topics.

Data and methodology

The choice of method is an inductive approach through qualitative interviews, based on the paradigmatic standpoint of social constructionism (Hall 1997/2013, p xxii; Collins 2010, p 38). The inductive approach allows for a smaller and qualitative amount of data, and a focus on the context in which my events of interest is taking place rather than deducing large amounts of data for my understanding, which would not have been possible with this time frame or approach. It also allows me to take a more flexible role, taking part in the research process and allowing for changes in emphasis as I move on (Collins 2010, p 41).
Social constructionism is the epistemological belief that the world can be understood through accounts of human experience. The material world is what it is, but the meanings we make of the world are created by context and experience, they are not in any way inherent in the material world (Collins 2010, p 40). Social constructionism as a theoretical standpoint is thoroughly explained as most useful to the practice of studying representation according to Stuart Hall (1997/2013, p xxi, 11), and also seems to be the point of departure for an amount of the previous research done in this and adjacent fields concerning sociology, ethnology and cultural studies.

The reason for choosing qualitative personal interviews as primary data (Collins 2013, p 124, 134) over visual analysis or a quantitative approach was my interest in the personal experiences of using Instagram to share pictures of one’s home. I myself am involved in the use of the tool and follow a few of these accounts, finding a great deal of pleasure viewing them, at the same time as many questions always come up when browsing. My personal opinions as such has sparked the interest for this usage, hence the compromised objectivity of this study has been an issue throughout my work with it. At the same time as my interest and my previous questions might bleed through, I also have a genuine interest in this practice which could possibly increase my attention to detail or gain angles of approach.

Data collection

During the month of April 2016, I have been collecting data (interview transcripts and images) through semi structured interviews, beginning with a fixed set of open ended questions with visual elements, where the participant’s own images sometimes were used as examples. The “sometimes” is due to that some of the users forgot to prepare by picking out their own favorites in advance as suggested, and instead agreed to just take the latest pictures of their feed and use as examples during the interview. For some of the respondents, the pictures seemed less important, and we did not talk about any specific examples but of the account or “feed” as a whole. The purpose of the data is not to analyze the images per se, but to analyze how the participants talk about their own images and how they themselves make sense of the practices around creating and sharing them.

Sample

Due to geographical convenience I based my selection of participants to those living in the south of Sweden or near Malmö. Age, types of images or types of homes have been of little to no importance, but participants are all adult women, operating Instagram accounts where they post aesthetically pleasing images from in and around their own homes (i.e. not only reposting other Instagrammers, spreading commercial or professional images taken by others). All of the women share the same practice of networking, which can be observed when looking at interactions with others in for example image comment fields. When it comes to amounts of followers I have chosen to not draw any lines either top or bottom, since the most important has been not the amount of followers, but the frequency of posts. I wanted the frequency to be at least a couple of posts a week but some showed to post several images every day.
See table 1 below for a description of the participants.

Table 1: Description of the user accounts as of may 23, 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>Following</th>
<th>Posting frequency</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Josephine</td>
<td>796</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>life, interior, outdoors, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martina</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>life, diy, interior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>4825</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>life, garden, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma S</td>
<td>2593</td>
<td>618</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>interior, garden, family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma H</td>
<td>33000+</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>weekly</td>
<td>outdoors, life, color &amp; shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malin</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>daily</td>
<td>life, interior, family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants were contacted through Instagram’s direct message feature, or via SMS. They were at the same time informed of the purpose of the study in order to choose if they wanted to participate or not. Of the 16 people that were asked, 6 participants said yes directly, the rest did not answer until after the time frame was passed. According to common practice, the study would benefit from having a somewhat larger sample, but I still imagine an acceptable level of saturation within the data was reached, as some of the themes began reoccurring already after talking to half of the participants. This does not mean that I would not have served from interviewing additional participants, just that the data collected here was sufficient for my study.

In order to keep the participants undisclosed I have covered their account names in images and screen shots, and I have only used their first names to distinguish them from each other in the text. Neither of the participants had any concerns of anonymity but this is how I decided to present them.

**Conduct**

I aimed to ask the participants to pick and send some of their own latest favorite images to me in advance. Afterwards it has shown that not many remembered doing their homework. In those cases we looked at their images together during the interview. I also asked if I could use images from their feeds as reference, which was not a problem.

The interviews were recorded with a recording application on my smart phone, files then moved to my laptop and transcribed by me from there. Translations to English were made later, when inserting quotes to the text. It should be noted that all translations throughout this study were done by me. Transcripts are saved one by one together with images from corresponding accounts, not attached as appendices but available on request. For my figures, the image source is *instagram.com* 1 which provides a web based viewing URL for each account, meaning they can be viewed in large scale not confined to a phone application. This has been suitable for this format as the image resolution otherwise would be insufficient.

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1The full web address is available in the non academic reference list
The interviews were conducted in Swedish, face to face in all cases but one which was held via Skype, a solution I believe was as good as it gets without actually meeting, since you get a feeling for expressions and body language which would not have come with for example a phone call. Four of the participants were located in the very south of Sweden and the other two a little more to the north. All of the participants turned out to be married house- or townhouse inhabitants with two or more children, all in their thirties or early forties.

The questions used in the interviews (available in appendix 1) were asked in an order suitable to the interview situation. In some cases there were follow up questions and side tracks due to the nature of the open ended questions and the conversational style of the interview. Characteristic to all of the interviews was the open feel of the meeting and the will to cooperate and discuss their own experiences. In many cases the interview transformed into a controlled conversation, something that I decided to embrace even if it might have resulted in some answers not being exhausted enough due to the many side tracks. The positive side to that transformation was gaining other approaches and following the participant’s own reasoning and associations. The risk of it is of course that my contributions to conversation might be affecting the participant’s answers. To minimize that risk and to ensure the questions and answers are perceived properly both by me and the respondent, I tried periodically to repeat wordings and meanings in order to check for validity during the interview. I have not gone back to validate the participant’s statements during the writing of this thesis.

**Data Analysis and presentation**

Once collected and transcribed, the interviews were analyzed using a very basic cross case thematic analysis, focusing on attitudes, identifiable themes and patterns of collective and individual behavior, as practically described by by Jodi Aronson in the short text *A Pragmatic View of Thematic Analysis* (1994). The transcripts were viewed simultaneously and organized question by question, to distinguish differences and similarities between the participants and to pick up on interesting passages suitable to my research questions.

The themes selected were based on my own interests in photography, the home and interior as a concept, identity negotiation, normativity, and group belonging. Themes were not necessarily based on most frequent appearance. Language (such as notable or specific wording) was also noted in addition to the overall themes, such as in what ways the participants described their practices or feelings.

Theoretical themes were established simultaneously, as new angles surfaced along the transcription of interviews, particularly when addressing memory and personal photography heritage, which was directly and indirectly mentioned several times during the interviews. Also theory and literature on peer- and group interactivity and the importance of like-mindedness had to be researched after the start of this project.

Visual analysis of the photographic images which figure in this text are not the main focus, but they are still not separable from the accounts of the participants as they are the main outcome of their Instagram usage. I have described and analyzed these pictures according to thoughts on representation by Stuart Hall (1997/2013, p 1-45), though I have been very general on representation as a practice. The way to do this has been through a very simple formal analysis (http://www.arthistoryrules.com/Essay_Writing/Visuals.html) identifying
elements and known objects, from which I then associated freely according to my previous knowledge of the social context in which the images belong.

The validity of this study belongs to its qualitative nature and its record of the participants thoughts around their practice, in combination with what I believe are credible scholars and theories. What is disadvantageous is my inexperience and what showed to be my inability to push the participants in completing a perhaps unfinished argument or reasoning. In failing to do this, I have most likely lost some valuable thoughts and details. Considering this, the data has been more than enough to work with, bringing in angles to this practice that I had not thought of or seen before.

**Findings**

The purpose of the interviews and collecting this image data has been to begin answering the research questions *how* and *why* the participants use Instagram to share pictures from in and around their homes with their online communities. As mentioned, the purpose of the whole study is then, together with suitable theoretical material, to understand this practice.

**The daily companion**

Generally, the interviews demonstrated that social media, and in this case particularly Instagram is an important part of the everyday lives of the participants, though the practice is indirectly complex and incorporates skilled use of invisible rules around image, style, accepted behavior and peer characteristics. The sophisticated underlying framework shows clearly when reasoning around followers, exposing the codes of what behavior is encouraged and what is less sought after within this culture. As a result of this, in order to control the boundaries of the culture, a silent fine tuning of who is in and who is out of the community is continuously performed.

When reasoning around the practice of using Instagram, their attitude towards the medium is that it is obvious and serious, not to be taken entirely lightly (like perhaps other entertainment) but rather as a complement and an enhancement to the sometimes drudgery of everyday life. To the users, the interface is filled with content and their usage is helping them in achieving both creative and social goals.

**Unloading all the images**

After conducting the six interviews, it showed that most of the participants never previously reasoned around how or why they use Instagram this way. Just one of the participants had actively taken a decision to start a new and aesthetical interior account, joining into what she felt would be a nice group on the premise that

> “it was such a shame not to be able to be in there, myself you know. Just being on the side, so I started my account when I was at home with my daughter.”

(Emma S)
At the same time she says the reason she even got the idea was because she was on parental leave and by that had more time for browsing.

“I was on parental leave, and it tends to be a lot of browsing (Instagram), so I started slipping into all of these interior accounts… I didn’t know then that I was that interested really but I’ve always liked being creative and I just stumbled upon looking at them”. (Emma S)

When approaching the participants with the question of why they share images from their homes, the responses are varied. The answers span from the initially crass fact of always being at home, to that of having an aesthetic home as a project and Instagram as an important practical part in documenting it nicely, together with sometimes seeing it “from outside” in order to get new ideas for change.

Helena claims that her home is a calm place for comfort, where all else is shut out and there is time for creating images:

It is like unloading all of the images I have inside, you know. To share and…. I don’t believe I think so much about followers and such; it never interested me, that’s not the thing. I post because I need to do it. It is almost like therapy, like processing the day. (Helena)

Malin means that it’s mostly images from her everyday life where she’s currently on parental leave, but that she has always had fun with her home as a stage where she has the possibility to be creative:

I’ve always loved building things up, and I’ve worked a lot with theater and sets… so these things are very much fun, and I get to see this all through the camera lens. With the interiors this is all enjoyable and you know… very creative. (Malin)

Josephine claims a more practical reason, choosing Instagram over blogging as it is more convenient:

It’s a great push to get stuff done around the house, having this forum. I’ve blogged, we’ve both blogged, my husband and I, we had one in common and I had my own and then you did stuff for the blog, but now it’s even more of a push because you have Instagram. Because it’s… you want to show what you’re doing. (Josephine)

Apart from the image display there is a great deal of socializing going on. In conclusion there are two types of Instagram relations. First, the one where you follow someone anonymously and put in the occasional “like”, and second, the one where you already are or later become friends and then actively engage in comments and conversations under each other’s images. When asking Malin what she knows about her followers she answers like most of the others:
It’s not many I know anything about… but there’s 8-10 people that I know and keep an eye on, and they are mostly like myself, almost the same age, kids maybe and then with an interest in interiors and stuff like that… (Malin)

Concluding, the women have all made their way into Instagram in different ways and for different reasons, but they are all staying on three grounds, the first being the convenience of using it in relation to other social media, the second being it’s aesthetic and creative features, and the third being its value as lightweight social network outside of a physical everyday setting, with friends they originally had no relation with in real life. In addition to these, there are some concerns from the participants on the discrepancy between real life and the idealized and superficial Instagram images, but that obstacle does not seem to be enough to make the participants stop using it.

Analysis

In general when doing this analysis, my own intentions of answering the research question of why this is a practice, assuming that it has to do with showing off or proving something towards others, was overshadowed by the participant’s records tugging in entirely other directions. Naturally, this was forcing me to think about why I am doing this research and if my original research question and my original assumptions is more important than the stories these women wants to tell. And the answer has been that the experiences of the participants have been of more interest than my setup, forcing me to change throughout the process, admitting that the intention is rather to have their experiences validated over me having mine validated. A thorough discussion on the same questions around feminist research and knowledge legitimacy based on experience is held by Skeggs (1997) acknowledging the difficulties of having power positions over the research participants and the constant negotiation in how their experiences will be respectfully treated through admitting that the knowledge coming from such research will always be situated and partial (Skeggs 1997 p 63-67).

With Skeggs discussions in mind and with representation theory clearly present it is also interesting to consider the differences between my assumptions and the participant’s own intentions. If the image has a communicative meaning and a personal purpose for the creator in the moment when posting it, that meaning disappears with time and location as it is used somewhere else on the web. As José Van Dijk puts it, “each re-materialization comes with its own illocutionary meaning attached, and each reframing may render the ‘original’ purpose unrecognizable” (2008, p 71).

In my case the original purpose might not be that far from the interpretation at a later stage, but when seen together and without captions, all images used in this study could be interpreted as show-off pieces, especially with our own experiences of dust rolls, dishes and piles of magazines on the kitchen table. The encoding and the decoding of the visual message is not just a question of how the message could differ between the sender and the intended receiver based on their understanding of cultural codes (Hall 1997/2013, p 11-13) but here, the whole setting is changed as there can be no control what so ever of what happens to the image, how the context changes, the receiver changes, the actual framing changes and the image in itself
changes (Van Dijk 2008). When involved in this culture within Instagram, there are some sophisticated cultural codes to be considered, and if not entirely aware of them, the decoding of those images might fail and the assumptions (in this case my own) about what they mean will be very different from the meanings they have within the culture. This shows the difficulties considering both the nature of digital images and their spread and availability to others than the intended, and the difficulties in general when it comes to the concept of representation. In this analysis I will be considering how the inside of the culture makes meaning of it from within, in relation to how it might be interpreted from the outside.

With that said, considering themes when doing an initial structuring of the interview material, I categorized the participant’s responses into several themes both to connect to a historical context and to look into practice. Themes include to a lesser extent interior design as part of women’s history and to a larger extent women’s practices of personal photography and the community and the negotiation of self and gender through visual online communication. In the interview material, the notion of home and style, thoughts about photography and online friendships pops up directly through the participants own accounts and reasoning, while the negotiation and presentation of self is more hidden in how they talk about the other. Especially when it comes to positioning oneself in a community network, the how seems very clear but the why is never really obvious, which has led to it being the most satisfactory when reflecting on their meanings.

What is remarkable is that though I initially chose these accounts for being related to interiors and displays of beautiful homes, not all of the participants talked about interior design in the way I thought they would.

The separate sphere of online culture

At the end of the interview sessions I ask what the Instagram-life means to the participants in relation to everyday life. The reactions there span between not knowing and being able to describe the difference, to clearly acknowledging Instagram’s importance as a different way of upholding social relations. To some of the participants, the Instagram network provides a path to spheres previously unknown or even closed to them. Helena comments that she feels there are no hierarchies within this culture:

Something that’s so fun is this with feeling so close to those you really should be distanced from. I could easily have contacted anyone, and it’s nothing I thought about before, that it would be so easy. It’s been a great experience to feel like “this is nothing!”
(Helena)

And she continues about contacting people in interesting businesses like gardening profiles local podcasters, TV-hosts or the similar:

It becomes neutralized in this world; you have the same prerequisites even though you don’t have that for real so to speak, you come closer, without having to be close.
(Helena)
The same is commented on spontaneously by Emma S when it comes to self esteem and contacting people she would never have dared contacting before:

You know these guys with the TV-show about vegetarian cooking? I thought it was so nice with the surroundings and I’m such a romantic and it was all these Arab horses running around in the background.... So when I was at the shops a few weeks ago she just stood there, the host of the show. And there I am thinking “a year ago I would have never ever said anything” but now I just “Oh how fun, I’ve seen, I mean I’ve watched your show and I love your horses and I’ve seen them on your Insta as well, and by the way I asked about your horses on Insta too” and she was just like “Yes, that’s fun, I remember that now”... and there we were suddenly talking about something else than just her being famous...

(Emma S)

A feeling of instant connection to other participants seems to be very valuable both when building confidence in relation to others and overcoming obstacles when actually wanting to contact someone, both in real life and online. Just by using Instagram, traditional social barriers seem to have lost some of their might.

The feeling of being on the same level as anyone in this culture is something that almost all of the participants bring up. When looking for common denominators, those engaging in this culture are all explicitly performing traditional femininity through different visual markers, which ties them all together in almost a self explanatory manner. The social framework and culture of being a Swedish middle class woman makes the threshold of first communication less difficult to overcome. One can claim that it is assumed that all “are the same” and therefore some initial obstacles are already removed. But all people are not the same, we know that. In trying to understand mechanisms behind selective representation like this it is essential to acknowledge that not all psychological complexities of a person is shared in a forum like this. For an outside viewer it is can easy to assume that what is shared is supposed to be representative of a whole person, the way that we experience Instagram as a kind of reality or liveness - possibly even connecting way back to the false notion that photographs tell the truth about the world around us (Wells 1997, p 25-26).

In this case, the activity of narrating a visual personal story can be seen as locating parts of oneself into a matrix of existing narratives of for example popular culture or femininity. We are putting ourselves together by using stories which we feel are the most useful for the purpose at hand, not using them at the same time, but selectively in order to function in the right context (Lawler 2013, p 30). Adding to narrative qualities of social media photo sharing, it has been observed in a study on Flickr that images are said not to be an attempt of communication with someone in particular, but to everyone at the same time (Richter and Schadler 2009, p174). Within this culture, to simultaneously communicate with many people which are both known and unknown brings with it a certain uncertainty of how the message will be received. That uncertainty makes it even more attractive to adhere to a known social practice where the outcome of the communication could be less unpredictable.

Theories on impression management which have been around since the 1950’s also help in grasping how this seemingly selective self representation works. Erving Goffman argues that the roles we play are not false or in any way masking the true person, but they are actually parts of what makes us persons (Hacking 2004, p 290). In the context of online communication this selective practice becomes even more obvious. In never meeting the ones
on the other side of the screen, it could be easy to render them or yourself for that matter, one-dimensional if not considering the mechanics of for example impression management or self narration. A perceived superficiality is probably also the cause of some of the user’s frustrations, like Malin when asked about how women are portrayed in this culture. She here describes a feeling of superficiality which she can’t completely identify with:

Oh it’s very difficult, I think it gets to be too much of all of this sometimes at the same time as I really enjoy it, but sometimes it feels like you’re not doing anything except creating showy images of our children or the interior… I mean what’s up with that? But at the same time it’s a relief to just indulge, that it’s OK to be shallow sometimes… I don’t know. I think it’s very difficult.

The participants are using the community to fill up on recognition, status, positive reinforcement, inspiration and pleasure, using femininity and home values as currency when mirroring oneself against another. Naturally this is not entirely without conflict, as many women (as we can understand from both Lawler and Skeggs) never really identify completely with femininity, or any other one identity for that matter.
In addition to this, when reading Skeggs, femininity is not just a possible part of one’s identity but a tool that can be used for fitting in and gaining power where no other powers can be exerted. As an example, women’s experienced powerlessness when it comes to politics, economics or more public matters (caused by patriarchy) can be temporarily revoked by exercising the things you know within a realm that is familiar to you (Skeggs 1997, p 172, 182). In this case there is agency and recognition to be gained by using traditionally feminine markers in communicating with like minded in a specific forum. Like the feeling of being good at something and knowing it:

I didn’t know I liked Interiors as much as I did, and then when you suddenly realize, like aha! Like when I had the first team here to do an interior story for a magazine 2,5 years ago….no, 1,5 years ago, sorry… almost two. It was sold in to some magazine but now I don’t even know if it’s going to get published. And I get anxious of where it’s going to end up. If I had known they’d make it as ugly as they did I would have styled it all myself and told them… but now it was more like “do what you want” and some things were pretty OK, but others were terrible. I mean I know I can do this now!
(Emma S)

When talking about like-mindedness, this is in fact the only thing that all of the participants have in common, even in language the word like-minded is used frequently throughout all interviews, like this part with Helena when reasoning around followers and what they get from following her, and she arrives at this after concluding that she’s not interested in conforming to anyone that does not understand her anyway:

I feel this with Instagram, that it’s pretty nice… maybe that’s why you end up in this circle of like minded… which for me is extra nice since I live in a town that I don’t really have a connection to, I mean my friends aren’t there. You get like another room, a nice room to be in you know? It’s like…yeah you’re like-minded. You find the ones you can recognize yourself in. Like that yes.
(Helena)
Like-mindedness is mentioned as one of the more important features within this loosely tied group. They all need to share the same interests, be of the same societal status, and work the framework of communication the same way. Otherwise they will consequently be removed from followers lists. Social order is read between the lines here, but despite the absence of formal rules (Gauntlett 2008, p103), most sidesteps gets noted and treated with exclusion.

When asked why the like-mindedness is important, Emma S answers that she removes and blocks followers who seem to be irrelevant, people who she thinks will not “get anything out of” following her and also people who don’t seem to be following the (unofficial) rules of reciprocity. Malin’s approach is similar:

It’s just an account, and you’re welcome to follow me you know. But I’m not going to chase followers. Can I say that? I mean I remove followers because I feel like they need to be like minded, they (the like minded; editors note) are welcome to follow me. Accounts I follow look like me you know.

(Malin)

Almost as an act of self correction, Martina tells me that she gave up and older account since it happened to gain followers of a different “sort” after she revealed a story of personal loss. The brooding atmosphere and the comments she got from that compelled her to completely remove her old account and create a new one in order to successfully find her way back to the positive atmosphere which she wanted to identify with. This time, by keeping to a light tone herself and not exposing anything too personal, this was also achieved, allowing her to move on.

In seeing this pattern of small continuous corrections and the importance of like-mindedness, one could argue that the participants find it extremely important to keep this social room intact and free from disturbances outside their cultural discourse.

Emma S again:

I don’t know...it’s so great with Instagram because there are tracks for everyone, I mean I have one for work now, with the preschool chefs, and there’s a channel for those too, it’s so much fun! But this with the interior design accounts, I need to tell you that there is no one being ill mannered, ever, because I can see that this is happening other places on social media, people being rude and condescending. Nobody was ever ill mannered here and that’s why you become friends...

(Emma S)

The importance of boundaries here seems absolutely crucial in providing trust between the users, even if the context is something as benign as families, homes and interiors. Trust responsiveness is a term used when discussing more intimate exchange of selfies and nudes within the realm of other social media or blogs. Trust responsiveness is based on the assumption that if an audience is not interested, they will automatically turn away and hence the risk for abuse or misuse is minimized (Tiidenberg 2015, De Laat 2008). Voluntary vulnerability is also an issue which is addressed when the above scholars research nudes, but the same vulnerability goes for exposing your home and possibly your children too, something that all of the participants actively reflect on and gives a great deal of thought to during the interviews. When it comes to vulnerability, Helena is telling me that she doesn’t care about privacy, that she is well aware of the spread of the images but that they will end up
somewhere sometime anyway, and with her agenda, posting what matters to her, her children are a very important part and should not be excluded from “her story”.

Why images are shared even though there are risks to it could further be explained through the power inherited in the image as currency, confirming bonds between people by the recognition of similar cultural codes (Van Dijk 2008). Similarly, Lasen and Gomez-Cruz (2009) arrive at conclusions relating to risks connected to sharing of digital images, that the digital encounters are rather facilitated than avoided “because of the multiple positive aspects of these encounters: sociability, affects, pleasures, exchange of ideas, etc., in spite of the potential risks of bad encounters and negative emotions generated” (Lasen and Gomez-Cruz 2009). In relation to that, both Emma H and Martina have tweaked their information and shifted posting behaviors due to image theft, something which made them feel uncomfortable.

When I began I had a quite small account, but then I became one of those selected by Instagram-users and I got loads of new followers. And I think that made me... when I don’t know who they are - I mean they are from all over the world - I don’t know in what contexts my images are being shown or how they are being used, and I also got some images stolen. I think that has made me less personal, posting more of what I think is fun or pretty or so. That’s why… no that’s why I’m not always that personal anymore.

(Emma H)

Instead of shutting down, they both created front page disclaimers, encouraging others to be respectful and use sources if reposting, and they are also told me that they have become more restrictive when posting images of their children, making sure their faces are covered or turned away.

In conclusion, the value of sharing images within a trusting and positive group outweighs the risks of images ending up in the wrong place or being used the wrong way. When sharing the images, the participants must assume and trust that the images are understood the way they are intended in order to continue sharing. By for example getting less personal and using more generic image styles, that risk of misunderstanding is also minimized.

**Aesthetic sanitization**

What happens instead is that the culture overloads on positivity, idealism and what we could call an *aesthetic sanitization*, clashing with the reality of dishes and socks that make up everyday life. In the interviews, many demonstrate (unsolicited) a will to acknowledge that clash and a will to clarify that they do get tired of the aestheticization and the superficial display. Many wanted to explain how they cope with those feelings in different ways.

The following images (*figures: 1-4*) are typical examples of posts by the study participants from the time of the interviews, and illustrate the positive tone and the emotional affirmation that is practiced in the comment fields. The comments as seen in the pictures are translated below the images.
Emma S mentions her anxieties around having a “messed up” home, and at the same time talks about her goal to always provide nice pictures for her followers which then becomes difficult since there are only so many nice angles to find when everything else is, as she puts it, just a mess.
In the comments:
*Good Morning, the sun is shining just like it only does in springtime
*Good Morning, it’s so great when the light (and the life) returns!
*GM
*Good Morning, wonderful
*Good Morning.

Emma H mentions something similar in not wanting to clean the house for the pictures, solving that by only imaging details. Josephine gets really stressed out when browsing too much of the good stuff, to the extent she can’t sleep at night because she thinks too much about all the fun things she’d like to get going in her own home, concluding that it’s not good for her, that she gets manic. But she also has conflicting feelings towards the superficial. On the relation between self and the ones she follows she puts it like this:

The ones I follow are a lot like me, it’s high and low and political and stupid interior stuff and things like that, and I like the ones that are super feminist, but I can’t write like that. Or the ones writing like all hell and always very clever… I wish… but I’m not… it takes too much time.

(Me:) Now you said “stupid interior stuff”, do you think it’s stupid? Yes! Every other week I think so and the other weeks I love it, so yes, I think it’s stupid. But at the same time I’m in control. The weeks I think it’s pretentious and dumb, those weeks I’m not there.

(Josephine)

Malin is more explicit when explaining what the differences between her own everyday life and life displayed on Instagram feels like:
Sometimes there will be days when I just don’t care about it, it just gets too much and you walk around in your home and, like it’s dirty and dishes and clothes and laundry everywhere and you go on Instagram and it’s just this showy air to everything, and it just makes me sick. Then I have to leave (Instagram) for a few days. (Malin)

The way the participants cope with feelings of inadequacy or wanting to reject the superficial indicates very well that the life portrayed on Instagram is a performance. The Participants are well aware that they themselves are parts of this performance but they will not break the aesthetic bubble by changing their style or their imaging, instead they move the clutter from the frame, they picture only details or they “take a break” in order to level with reality and by that preparing to go back in again.

Fig 3: Martina, April 2016
In the Comments:
*Ready for a new week? We’re prepping for work, golf practice, a birthday, a party, fence building and some praying to the weather gods for sun and just a tiny bit of warmth. Let’s do this!*
*Such a nice kitchen, love it with the yellow color*
*Hi and good morning in the pretty kitchen*
*Hello*

The question of if one really wants to portray a “real life” comes up when encountering this behavior. Initial reactions on the aestheticized home life might be like my initial one, why is this a thing? Why can’t you just be truthful and show your dirty dishes then? But naturally it is not that simple. The longing for what Gledhill and Ball calls a more *psychologically rounded (media) character* is a reaction to the representation of stereotypes in media (in Gledhill and Balls case, the stereotypes of soap operas) but the problem becomes obvious when trying to solve this by putting one representation out by entering another (Gledhill and Ball in Hall 1997/2013, p 342f).
One of the representations might, depending on context, be read more or less realistic than the other, but in this case, who says that it is realism they are looking for when wanting to imagine themselves in a virtual photo album? As Helena puts it, the images are very much imaginary, like dreams of how she wants life to be in contrast to how she experiences it every day:

Well it’s intense all around me and two small children yelling mom, mom, mom, mom, and I commute, there’s a lot of people and impressions all the time, this everyday business you know, people yelling and brawling and ugh, a lot of impressions all the time, and then work, you’re there all the time and it’s all this connecting and compromising and you’re supposed to use your head all the time. So what I need is this bright room without all of that, I never have time for working out and I used to do yoga and that helped a little, but this becomes like a sort of, I don’t know, maybe I wind down, I escape into another world, a dreamy feeling where it’s all what I want it to be”

(Helena)

Reasons for frustration

Looking at the previously mentioned dual feelings towards Instagram, we have identified that there is a frustration and some negative connotations to the shallow stereotypical feminine image, suspiciously at the same time as it is willingly reproduced. The stereotype of
femininity can be accepted since the use of it brings a certain amount of comfort and it gives agency and power to the users within the culture where it is used (Skeggs 1997). A way of reasoning around the frustration could be its origins in a historical practice of masculine culture trivializing women and femininity, resulting in all things from lower wages and unwritten history to political powerlessness and violence. As some of the above has improved in many areas, the trivialization of home making and feminine consumption is still obvious in many western countries, making every choice concerning representation of values to a choice between the legitimate masculine and the trivial feminine. The route to cultural legitimacy is still, here and now, to choose the behavior of the masculine stereotype (Sparke 1995/2010, p 171) which could be one way of understanding the feelings of irritation when not being shamelessly free to indulge in a nice floral arrangement without the gnawing feeling that you should be doing something useful.

In reasoning around how we might use this feminine culture maybe not to subvert, but at least to survive and resist, Penny Sparke makes this conclusion:

“In the contemporary industrialized world, women, feminine taste, desire, pleasure and material culture make up a stereotypical package. Short of a complete social, economic, and cultural revolution that would transform the framework that constructed the package, the stereotypes we have inherited will remain in place, with only small mutations occurring to them over the years. Within this framework, however, if women cannot achieve the "joy" that feminist writer Rosalind Coward has claimed would come with radical change and the elimination of “constructed desires” to which she feels women are held hostage, they can at least experience the pleasure to be had from being one with their constructed tastes and the material culture that sustains and reinforces them. *This does not necessarily mean a living a life dominated by false consciousness but represents a form, however minor, of feminine resistance to dominant masculine culture.*” (Sparke 1995/2010, p171)

Within the boundaries of this small research, half of the participants sometimes feel disgusted or irritated with this trivial culture, and half of them say nothing about it which indicates that the attitudes are very individual. And even though the case of frustration is clear to see when it’s there, none of the participants are dismissive towards the practice in any way, which again tells us that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

**The practice of imagining home**

When it comes to practices around producing the images, all participants agree that the process needs to be instant, and the transfer between a separate camera and a computer and a smart phone would be too time-consuming, which is also why none of the participants use separate gear when taking photos. Even though half the participants have backgrounds in various levels of hobby photography, including taking classes or sharing images in other photo specific web forums, none are using that for Instagram. Part of that might be because Instagram is not built for importing external images. That process is quite inconvenient, meaning you have to use a cable and a computer and set aside time for it, time which none of the participants claim they have. Instead they use their phones, where the app is readily installed.
In the moment of snapping, there are various levels of preparation. As Helena states, her life is a continuous stream of photographing in which just a few images become Instagram posts. Taking that many pictures is not a surprise that she enjoys using Instagram to the extent that she does. The pictures are more fun if they come to use, and as stated by Gillian Rose, the practice of doing something with your snapshots, sharing them with friends and family or sending them to someone has been and is still inherent in the way we think of the snapshot’s purpose (Rose 2010).

I can put it like this: I take obscene amounts of photos. It’s a way for me to experience things. I see through the camera. And when I choose one, I’m like thinking... no, I’m not thinking. I’m just like “let’s go with this one and this is what I want to convey right now” because it feels right in here, it’s that feeling that I want to express, And then I always... I’m so used to, since I was always developing my own pictures and choosing and cropping I spend a lot of time with “this is what I want it to look like” and then i fix it. And then I post it. And sometimes just a little tiny text and sometimes a little more, sometimes just superficial and sometimes there are just a lot of thoughts coming along….whatever feels right at the moment. I don’t think I have a modus operandi; it’s so connected to when I’m doing it.

(Helena)

Others think of Instagram specifically when framing the moment. Emma H claims that she looks at her surroundings with Instagram in mind, having fun chasing light and motifs with a certain style for her followers as she walks around her home and outdoors. Josephine prepares, according to herself, way too many pictures before picking one, but that is (contrary to Helena) when she has already decided that there is going to be a picture taken, as if she has already figured it out:

I take like 30 pictures and my daughter says to me “isn’t that cheating?” when I’m going on moving things around and I’m just like, “ehh, no” ‘cause otherwise I wouldn’t have taken the picture since it wouldn’t have looked good. So it’s not cheating, but in a way... First I take loads of pictures, then I apply filters and crop and all of that. But already when I take the pictures I have the... the caption is there.

(Josephine)

Though previously not into photography as a hobby, Emma S has thought a about what she likes and how she usually edits the pictures and she has an interest in learning more. She also thinks about how to improve and is trying out different things:

It this thing with the light, to experiment. That’s why I think it would be a blast to take some photography class. I have a certain style when I edit them and it would be fun to develop that. You want to get at a specific ambience. And I really want... I mean I’m not really good at taking food pictures, but some people post these fantastic... but I think it’s kind of fun taking pictures when things look great. Sometimes in the weekends I will, like when my husband is sleeping, set the table with some stuff. I have all these trays that I received for promotion, I mean I did get all of these things, and it’s fun when I have like a mission to take pictures of a thing like that... I even tried that classic they make fun of in Julkalendern (a family TV-show) “theeere kids, just stretch your hands in over the plate now so I can take a picture” haha isn’t it terrible? (Emma S)

Though Emma laughs (and I did with her) about the staging of images, and Josephine jokingly explains to her daughter the lengths we go through to create nice pictures, the
arranging of both physical objects and people in images is more rule than exception. Since early photography staging has at first been a necessity and later a wish in several aspects, at least when wanting to image oneself. The poor wanted to appear middle class, the vacations needed to look happier and the family life more successful than what it actually was. And contrary to the role of documentary photography, the personal or domestic photo has always had a selective role, and had no aspirations of portraying reality in any way even from the early days (Wells et.al 1997, Rose 2010, p12 ff).

Before we go into the aesthetics and the circulation of images inside this culture, we need to look into what the reoccurring word like-mindedness means to the participants. According to the participants own statements, like-mindedness here is having the same interests and also being “in the same situation”. Their interests span from photography to gardening and include crafting, DIY, interior decoration, their children and renovations, just to include a few of the most frequent mentions. That “same situation” is by some explicitly stated, by some implied between the lines, and by some taken completely for granted as living in a heteronormative twosome relationship with small children.

**Identifying with the material home**

Considering the contents of their descriptions and their situation, the home is a central concept to the participant’s lives, both in the sense of the housing and the concept of family. As fittingly described in a study made on middle class Americans on their relations to the home as a symbolic environment, to them “a home is much more than a shelter; it is a world in which a person can create a material environment that embodies what he or she considers significant. In this sense the home becomes the most powerful sign of the self” (Czikszentmihalyi 1981, p 123). To use the term “language of display”, the middle class housewife’s work to decorate and arrange her home for others to see was already important during the nineteenth century. The visual home functioned not only to express her own image of self but to position herself socially by the intentional use of commodity items mixed in personal arrangements (Sparke 1995/2010, p 14, 25). Today any rules of such symbolic communications are much less fixed due to the development of different middle class cultures and tastes all depending on their contexts, but still, we can see a will to make statements on identity and personal taste through the interiors and images of homes in this study.

So when it comes to home as an extension of the self, there are some indirect thoughts on it. Malin, talks about what she is (or wants to be seen as) when asked about what she’d like to convey with her images, (fig 1) indicating that the interior reflects her personal interests and characteristics, like for example her environmental consciousness:

Oh, OK, it’s not often I analyse myself that much but I think maybe that… That I’m one that likes interiors, I keep up with trends and at the same time I have my own… personal touch. And also that I decorate with recycled stuff, vintage and second hand.

(Malin)

Emma S also has thoughts of her interior style in relation to others and how it represents her and her husband’s personalities:
I like… white… or not the color white per se, but I like the light and the bright, you know. I like it when it feels summery. And there was someone who went here to maybe take some pictures… she was like “your house has a typical summer feel to it” and I think it has.

(Me:) So you agree to that, is that a success for you having her say that?

No not exactly… that would be more that the house is a mix between me and my husband. It is playful, not grown up. (Emma S)

She continues disidentifying with what she calls a boring style of many homes in the suburban town she lives, where she means the furniture is ugly, heavy and impractical, not suitable for the kind of family living she has invested in. She concludes it needs to be practical for the kids. In this statement she does tie the home very much to how she disagrees with a more traditional and “adult” style, and that she has thought a great deal about what it means for the rest of the family too, from a material perspective.

The images

Just looking at the formal elements of the images, some patterns can be identified immediately when cross examining them. In figure 5 and 6 there are a few markers typical for the Instagram home- and interior account, foremost the image taken from an angle straight above the motif - like the cat in the top left corner of figure 5, and the teapot in the upper left of figure 6.

![Fig 5: Emma S March/April 2016](image1)

Another typical marker is the still life, most often being a selection of a wall, a shelf or a corner with carefully arranged items such as top right image of figure 6 or the bottom right of...
fig 5. Holding up items (like flowers) against a clean wall is also a style practice but not featured in any of the examples from my participants during the weeks for the interviews. Some users, like Emma S (fig. 5 bottom row, middle picture) collects her best pictures every month in a grid of nine pictures and writes a little something about the past month and the expectations for next.

What can be made from objects in these Instagram images is a traditional feminine line-up consisting of designer items, textiles, furniture and framed prints, gardens growing, flower bouquets and house pets as can be noted in figures 5-8. Especially flowers have a strong connection to femininity, dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where the caring for fresh flowers in and around the home as well as bringing flower ornaments to textiles and decorations first became closely linked to the feminine activity of home making (Sparke 1995/2010, p 20). Furniture and textiles as well as decorations have since the same time period in western history also had a psychological and symbolic value beyond the pure utilitarian, giving meaning, status and respectability to the women arranging them, all depending on their context (Sparke 1995/2010, p 21).

Fig 6: Josephine, April 2016

A home, as Adrian Forty puts it, is not just a dwelling but an *icon* where the objects appearing indicate what is supposed to be done there (2000, p 94). And based on the consensus of social context, the objects also indicate what activities are desirable there. Continuing, the images here can often hold textile dressed sofas or beds, children resting or playing, set tables, freshly baked bread, cake, cooking, coffee or tea in designer- or flea market cups, cozy garden
corners or outdoor life. All of the things that mark and indicate leisure and social family life without actually depicting it as it happens. And we get it; we understand what a home is supposed to be. Especially when the image is void of people but the caption tells us about all tomorrow’s parties and that kid’s birthday that was celebrated earlier. Home is without doubt supposed to be social but depicting real people would make it harder for the viewer to identify with it.

**Stories and imagining yourself in them**

The void of human presence can make the interior a stage where we are to imagine things to come, where life is happening in between the shots. Like in commercial products, for example the IKEA catalog or the interior decoration magazine, the Instagram image with its sometimes similar visual approach also becomes a space where you imagine yourself, but not with the purpose of purchasing a product.

Imagining and dreaming, planning and negotiating herself in relation to Instagram images is something that Josephine describes as sometimes exhausting. She means that she easily falls into imagining all these interiors, not being able to make distinctions between what is realistic for herself as a “doer” to achieve. And with that she also claims losing her own self in imagining too many others. For her, the home and the interior seems closely knit to her image of self, and she is frequently dreaming of different materially pleasurable settings in which the story of family life could be played out.

![Fig 7: Emma H, April 2016](image)

So from a far we might read or decode these images and these items of the home, as simple aesthetically pleasing images from someone’s house, displaying new purchases or a nice
arrangement of coffee cups. But to the participants within this culture those same images are parts of social convention (Hall 1997/2013, p 14) and identity shaping lifestyle (Gauntlett 2008, p112), where every image is a new piece to someone’s story, not unlike the story of a soap opera where there is no beginning and there is no end, just an endless middle (Gledhill and Ball in Hall 1997/2013) open for you to imagine yourself in.

**Memorandums or instant communication**

If comparing this practice to twentieth century tradition of taking personal photographs, like for example the family album or the vacation picture, there has been some shifts. The image has been digitalized, bringing with it the inherited risk of tampering and unwanted exposure when and if sharing it online (van Dijk 2008) And the previous activity of taking family photos which was an act of selecting and creating happy memories (Holland 1997, p 133f, Rose 2010, p 13, p 50) has shifted towards something more communicative and less time resistant (van Dijk 2008, Lasen & Gomez Cruz 2009). Though these shifts, I believe that the personal images these participants take today also has the purpose as memorandums - not only as quick comments, something that might belong to the fact that we are dealing with women, adults, who still use the digital camera in ways reminiscing the analog. To corroborate this, Helena speaks about this almost immediately when starting the interview, when asked what she uses Instagram for, and it is just that of a memory aid.

I post almost three pictures a day and it just comes automatically, naturally without really thinking about what I’m going to post. It’s like a part of me, a diary. But not like a report, I connect images to memories, so if I see an image, if an image pops up like in *Timehop* which is fun, it triggers a lot of memories for me and it doesn’t even have to have a caption because I’m in that memory already when I see the image.

(Helena)

Also Emma talks about images as memories but she looks further back into facebook for the years before she used Instagram, mostly because those images are more private then her Instagram ones. Josephine says she uses Instagram as an image diary with which she can go back and check how her home has changed and to remember what the kids did and looked like when they were smaller. When asking her if she thinks of it like a family album she says:

Yes, it is in a way. But I will never do that (family album) again, I have no analog camera that takes regular pictures and I will definitely not go and collect my digital images to print them out. I did that once and never again, ‘cause it came out like 700 pictures and then we had to do something with them….

(Josephine)

Even if the practice of creating images to make memories will change to benefit that of visual communication through instant messaging or quick looks at someone’s screen, I still want to argue that the act of taking the pictures in itself is important, no matter the outcome. The choosing and cropping and selecting of moments, lights and motifs is an act of self reflection and an internal conversation. The notion of seeing yourself from outside, of capturing a

*Timehop* is an app which provides flashbacks through images from “this time last year” See references list for full web address.
moment or a view, the choosing of that moment is in itself a negotiation even if the result never reaches either the family album or the Instagram feed. And with that standpoint, the fact that the motifs have changed from pictures of family members posing with a Christmas tree, to pictures of empty designer couches, the activity of selecting those frames still is a tool for narrating one’s story.

Fig 8: Helena, April 2016

Of course there are implications to this, as the personal photographs we once had for understanding history and making sense of individual lives (Holland 1997, p 143) are changing with digitally shared images. Digital personal records might be lost, but what if this part of Instagram is forever and will we miss out on the family members and the Christmas tree, only keeping the picture of that designer couch? A risk like that is probably not very likely as even in this small group of participants, half of them are using their accounts almost as family albums.

Discussion

The findings and analysis leading up to this have all contributed to an understanding of how the materiality of interior and/or the home has shown to be important for all the participants in realizing themselves, either from just being in the home, or in the activity of transforming it to fit different images of how family and life should be acted out. These activities, together with
visual stories of family and everyday life make up the basics of the culture I have been looking at.

As my perspective has been just slightly from outside, the characteristics that were revealed around this practice has provided me with a new way of thinking about both my own and others Instagram use. I have come to conclusions that the practice of sharing home images helps coping with the everyday lives of women in many different ways. The ones I have focused on here have been narrowed down to the uses of traditional personal photography, femininity, concepts of home and interiors to represent the self and by that finding a space online.

Ideas about selecting suitable aspects of identity and culture to fit different purposes (Lawler 2008, Gauntlett 2008) also apply online. Perhaps they are even more valid online than in real life due to limitations naturally inherited in the applications we use. There is no way we could give away the full complexity of our personalities through a window as small as a box of mints. And why would we? The boundaries of the online group (Tiidenberg 2015) make us feel safe and free to communicate as long as we keep within given limits. We know what to expect in the behavior of both ourselves and others, which stands in bright contrast to more mundane or even threatening aspects of both our online and offline lives. Issues occur first when outside viewers make assumptions on what is shared and why, putting a finger on how difficult it is to understand representation in practice. The encoded message has one meaning and the decoded gets another one where ever it ends up, all depending on social structures and cultural context (Hall 1997/2013).

Concurring with the above, some of the participants talked explicitly about a safe space, a quiet room and a positive community as an opposite to the rest of the internet where there is a risk of getting misunderstood or scorned. Looking further into a closed circuit communication based on specific boundaries, being feminine and traditional in this case does keep you under the radar; undetected and uninteresting to which ever perpetrator one might imagine. But, if the way of coping with either emotional or physical threats from “public” internet is to revert to an aestheticized feminine culture, however empowering it is within the group, this could give us a reason to further look into women experiencing safety on the net and the possibilities to use other tools than traditional feminine features to stay safe. By this I am in no way implying that any of these participants are unhappy with their identities or behavior, but it would of course be interesting to think about what thoughts and images would be shared if gender was not such a compulsory behavior and a guarantee for social acceptance in this western culture (Lawler 2008, p 131).

Implementation and limitations to the project

This research project was never difficult to complete as there were no major obstacles pertaining the interviews or finding the literature. The material provided by the participants sufficed to supply angles to understand this practice of adults using visual social media, though some of it had to be left out as it did not fit in the chosen scope. In short, what were left out were two subjects connected to free labor, production and consumption (Ritzer 2014) which I could suggest as continued research. The two subjects could be identified after talking to Emma S and Martina: First when it comes to photographers and interior professionals “keeping track” of Instagram users to use their homes for interior jobs that will be sold in to magazines. In return, some of the Instagram amateurs are looking to have their homes featured in interior magazines or
getting acknowledged “outside”, even if it is (at the moment) for free. In that aspect there is a feeling that Instagram also could be used as a spring board to further success and professional acknowledgment. Through this, a subjugated dream of using social media to earn a living becomes visible.

Second, there is the circulation of household goods for marketing purposes. Household goods provided by manufacturers are given away by Instagrammers to other Instagrammers in sweepstakes, and deals are being done with the more popular to promote products from manufacturers inside their homes, bringing to mind product placements in films and TV. In addition to this, those not having deals with retailers or agents use brand name hashtags and marketing hashtags anyway, just to promote their favorites.\(^3\)

Based on the above, looking into mechanisms of how household goods and interiors relate to economy and status could be of interest for another study.

**Summary**

My analysis of the findings have shown that evident feminine stereotypes are used as tools for getting recognition and agency within the culture, and that a great pleasure is taken in engaging in both picture taking, storytelling and the viewing of other’s images and stories. External threats of intrusion and disturbance are handled by self correction and correction of followers in order to keep the culture intact, which emphasizes the importance of a safe space. What initially can be viewed as reproduction of one-dimensional stereotypes is not to be assumed representative of these women’s complete identities, as they are aware of, and reacting to the duality between a superficial stereotype and a complex reality. The interiors and the homes are used as a framework for this culture where participants are creating a separate space to use for remembering moments, being creative, developing skills and engaging in an unchallenging social practice.

From outside it might be argued that this practice is an act of “playing it safe” by using the tools that you are familiar with when otherwise powerless to society and politics, as Beverly Skeggs (1997) argues, or it could be more empowering as to why shouldn’t we be engaging in such pleasurable practices now that we’re “stuck” with them, as Sparke (1995/2010) claims. But from a user perspective, identity is complex and constructed of several parts, of which we use different features for different purposes (Lawler 2013).

Photography, interior design and the materiality of home can be claimed as tools with which the participants continuously reflect on and create identities, at the same time as they are positioning themselves socially (Holland 1997, Sparke 1995/2010, Cziszentmihalyi 1981). In the end, the refined practice of sharing images, engaging socially and being creative is enjoyed enough by the participants to continue, though they are faced both with privacy concerns and frustration with a trivial and polished surface.

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3 For more on free labor, and the dissolving dichotomy between production and consumption (the concept of “prosumtion”) I refer to George Ritzer’s *Prosumption: Evolution, revolution, or eternal return of the same?* (2014) as an overview.
References


Hu,Y; Manikonda, L and Kambhampati, S. 2013. *What We Instagram: A First Analysis of Instagram Photo Content and User Types* Arizona State University: Department of Computer Science


Non academic references:


Source of participant’s images <http://www.instagram.com> [2016-05-18]

Appendice

Appendice 1:

Interview questions used, original followed by support- or follow up questions in brackets:

- Tell me a little about yourself (how old are you, where do you live, do you have a family, what do you like to do? etc)
- What kind of social media do you use? (What is your social media history?)
- How long have you been using Instagram? (Do you have more than one account?)
- What do you use Instagram for?
- How did you come about using images around your home to Instagram, where did you get the idea? (If it wasn’t an idea, where and how and why did it start?)
- Describe how you go about posting an image on Instagram? (Do you plan ahead? What triggers you?)
- If you make a post, how many images do you take /prepare before picking one suitable for posting?
- What tools do you use? (Cell phone, camera, filters, editing?)
- Looking at their feed or chosen images: Are these pictures typical for you? (What would you like to say about them?)
- Do you ever remove or edit posts once they are uploaded to your feed? If so, why or why not?
- What impression do you want to make through your images? (Your feed)
- What are your thoughts about your audience/followers? (Does amounts of followers and likes matter to you?)
- Who are your followers?
- How do they behave? (Can you tell anything about what they like or don't like? What about gaining or losing followers?)
- What is it they like about your feed?
- What are your thoughts on yourself as an audience/follower to others?
- How do you behave as a follower (Are you active/passive? Does it matter?)
- Have you experienced anything when using Instagram this way that was unexpected?
- What are your thoughts on your Instagram life vs your IRL life? (Do you see it as another sphere or is it integrated?)