“First, let me take a selfie”
- Young adults’ self representation on Instagram

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Abstract

The possibility to create an alternate identity is different today due to the digital world. Previous research on online self-presentation focused mostly on identity constructions in anonymous online environments, where users could choose to be anonymous. This study aims to move forward and study online self-presentation in the non-anonymous social media platforms that are more commonly used today, especially amongst young adults with the research questions:

• How do young adults present themselves on Instagram?
• Do young men and young women represent themselves differently on Instagram, if so, how?
• Can differences be identified in the responses, i.e. likes and comments between young women and young men? And if so, how can these differences be described?

The study has been limited to Instagram, since this is a popular platform for young adults, who are target group for my study.

The material is 120 posts from six various Instagram users, three male and three female. The findings are that young adults represent themselves through selfies on Instagram. They represent themselves differently through filters, poses and also in the way they communicate with their followers. The female users were more prone to highlight their appearance and post selfies from indoors and preferably a home environment. The male users more often posted from outdoors and with some activity. The female users got more responses from their followers comparing in terms of comments and likes and often complimented by their looks which is associated with constructed gender roles of femininity and masculinity; men being outdoor and active while the woman is passive, beautiful and prefers to stay at home. However, the findings also showed indications of not replicating gender roles and myths about what is feminine and masculine, as some of the male users selfies had traits that associated to female presentation and the female selfies had traits associated to male stereotypical presentation.
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1. Introduction

Previous research on online self-presentation focuses mostly on identity constructions in anonymous online environments, where users could choose to be anonymous. For this study I aim to move forward and study online self-presentation in the non-anonymous social media platforms that are more commonly used today, especially amongst young adults. The study has been limited to Instagram, since this is a popular platform for young adults, who are the target group for my study.

Social media allows people to communicate and form relationships with each other, regardless of time and their physical location. The usage of social media in general and Instagram in particular are rapidly increasing, although it is often overlooked that the representation of the users and their lives behind the screen are often not objective. Teenagers are in a life-stage during which they are developing their identity and sense of self-esteem and they do so in a wider social context with influence of their friends and peers (Ling, 2004; Shari et al. 2010). On Instagram the users represent themselves by visuals and text, however the dominating part is the visual as one can not post something without an image, however is it possible to post an image without a caption. With the rise of social media platforms that focuses on the visual, such as Instagram, the selfie, i.e. a self-taken photo has become more and more common. Instagram offers its users to choose what parts of their lives they want to share with their online peers and you can also be selective with who you share this with by having an private account. Filters, angles and poses are a few factors that can be added to the photos to enhance and embellish reality.
1.1. Instagram

Instagram was founded October 6, 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and was designed as an app for Apple and Android and not for desktop computers or PCs.

Instagram is a fun and quirky way to share your life with friends through a series of pictures. Snap a photo with your mobile phone, then choose a filter to transform the image into a memory to keep around forever. We're building Instagram to allow you to experience moments in your friends’ lives through pictures as they happen. We imagine a world more connected through photos (Instagram, 2016).

This is how the mobile app describes them self on their ‘About us’ page. Furthermore they explain how the app was developed to solve three common problems, one of them being how pictures taken with mobile camera comes out looking “mediocre”. This problem is, as the creators of the app claim, solved by the various selection of Instagram filters. The second problem is, according to Systrom & Krieger (2010) that sharing on multiple platforms can be a pain, and therefore Instagram enables you to share your photos instantly on multiple platforms. The third and last problem is technical, most uploading experiences are clumsy and takes long time, whereas Instagram has been optimised to give the user a fast and efficient experience (Instagram, 2016).

As previously mentioned, the aim of the app is to connect people through visuals rather than text. The app has become extremely popular fast and reports from 2015 shows that 92 percent of teenagers (age 13-17) go online daily with over half of them having an Instagram account, which makes it the second most popular social media platform after Facebook (PewResearchCenter, 2015). To register an account all that is required is a valid e-mail address and you can connect your Instagram to your Facebook account to share your images easily and find contacts etc. Instagram has become increasingly popular in Sweden as well, with 69 per cent of 12 -15 year olds using the app daily whereas the daily usage for 16 – 25 year olds use it daily, as demonstrated in table 1.1. (soi2015, 2015).
Table 1.1.

Instagram usage Sweden (in percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Daily (%)</th>
<th>Occasionally (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 - 15 y/o</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 - 25 y/o</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 - 35 y/o</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 - 45 y/o</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 - 55 y/o</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 - 65 y/o</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 - 75 y/o</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75+</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (soi2015, 2015)

Instagram users not only communicate with each other through pictures and text, hashtags and emojis are frequently occurring and one can search for images just by using a hashtag. A hashtag is a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#), used on social media sites such as Twitter to identify messages on a specific topic. (Dictionary.com, 2016). A caption is a word, sentence or paragraph to describe the image. An emoji is a small digital image or icon used to express an idea or emotion in electronic communication (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2016). The emojis, like photographs, are able to communicate regardless of language. It has become so commonly used globally that emojis has its own dictionaries online, such as emojipedia.org. The forerunner to emojis is emoticons, which is a typographic display of a facial expression; emojis on the other hand are actual pictures. The first emoticon was credited to Scott Fahlman at Carnegie Mellon University in 1982, when he added a “smile emoticon” in an email to indicate wisecracks in text communication (theconversation.com, 2015).

As previously discussed, the development of technology has naturally changed the way we use internet and consume media. The usage of mobile internet is no longer just a complement to browsing on a laptop or desktop computer, instead it is becoming a replacement to stationary
computers in some cases and some parts of the world, especially amongst young adults. Figures on how mobile internet usage rapidly increases compared to the usage of desktop internet, as described in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2.**

Total Digital Media Time Spent by Platform (in percent)

![Table 1.2](image)

Source: (comscore, 2014)

Following this mobile trend, Instagram is, contrary to other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, developed as an app and not a website. Even if there is a website than enables account holders to log in and view their on and other peoples accounts and images, webstagram.com, Instagram is designed to be used solely on mobile devises and not on stationary computers or a laptop. Websta calls itself the Instagram web viewer and does not allow users to upload photos or visit their news feed (websta, 2016).

With more than half of all teenagers active on social media users having an Instagram account it is the second most popular social media platform after Facebook (PewResearchCenter.org, 2015). Instagram works similarly to Facebook with a news feed where the user sees all photos posted by other Instagram account holders he or she follows. One can also browse through other accounts by using the Explore function. If a user choses to have a private account, another user has to send a request in order to view their photos. An open account can be viewed and shared by anyone on Instagram. This can lead to ethical issues, especially when it comes to underage children and young adults. This will be discussed further in the Ethical issue section.
1.2. Aim of study

For this study I would like to research how young adults represent themselves on Instagram and if they an ‘online identity’ on the platform. Moreover, I aim to distinguish whereas there are any differences in how young men and young women represent themselves and what response they get from their followers in terms of comments and likes. Furthermore I want to examine if stereotypical traits of masculinity and femininity are replicated and if maintain if cultural constructed gender roles and replicated.

The purpose of this paper is to obtain a deeper understanding of the identity creation and representation of young adults on Instagram along with the evolution of the media landscape and technical developments. Many studies has been conducted about representation of gender and young adults in media, however the rapidly increasing usage of social media amongst young adults makes this an important area to investigate.

1.3. Research questions

The purpose of this study is to gather a deeper understanding of how young adults create online identities on Instagram and whether there is a difference in self-representation between young men and young women in Sweden. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How do young adults present themselves on Instagram?
- Do young men and young women represent themselves differently on Instagram, if so, how?
- Can differences be identified in the responses, i.e. likes and comments between young women and young men? And if so, how can these differences be described?

To answer the research questions the collected data will be analysed through the theoretical framework of media’s role in shaping sense of belonging and identity, also from a gender perspective. This has been done with the help quantitative content analysis tools as well as qualitative semiotic analysis.
2. Theoretical framework

Theories on how media plays a role in creation of identity and affects our everyday life are highly relevant for this study. To understand how social media in today’s society contributes to identity creation and feeling of togetherness and belonging to a community, one has to firstly investigate how media has developed, even before Internet and smartphones were available. Therefore theories on how the media landscape has evolved, especially since the entrance of the mobile phone, will be presented and used as part of the theoretical framework. Additionally the theoretical framework consist of; identity theory that describes the importance of identity creation for an individual, as well as gender theory in social media, since the study investigates the representation of the self in social media and it’s differences between gender. Finally I will add theories on gender to investigate whether differences can be identified in the content posted by young females to the content posted by young males, and if so, why.

2.1. Media landscape

Morley & Robbins (1995) argues how the media landscape is developing and significant transformations are occurring in the information and communication media, as a consequence of new technological forms of delivery.

The authors stresses that: ‘We are seeing the restructuring of information and image spaces and the production of a new communications geography, characterised by global networks and an international space of information flows; by an increasing crisis of the national sphere; and by new forms of regional and local activity’ (Morley & Robbins, 1995, p. 1).

Couldry (2012) argues how media is fundamental to our sense of living in a social world. Even since the beginning of modernity, media have transformed the scale on which we act as social beings. In the current era of digital media, the media is being transformed into platforms, content and producers (Couldry, 2012).

Morley & Robbins (1995) further mentions in their study how our senses of space and place are all being significantly reconfigured along with the new technology mediums (Morley & Robbins, 1995). This can be seen as a forerunner to the studies where the mobile phone and mobile internet enables us to communicate with each other non regardless of time and
Fortunati (2012) argues how the use of mobile phone in today's society replaces the real interaction between humans. This results in a classical shift – where the physical public space has been replaced to a virtual space. Couldry (2012) and Fortunati (2012) stresses that with the entry of internet and mobile phone we are now able to be continuously co-present with each other even if we move independently across space (Couldry, 2012:257), which is clearly demonstrated by social media apps since they make us available wherever we are any time of the day. So called notifications, an icon or sound on a smartphone, tablet, or other electronic device indicating the user has one or more messages, activity alerts, updates to apps, etc (collinsdictionary, 2016) also contributes to making us constantly available to others and aware when people are trying to communicate with us online.

2.2 Identity

From the early days of modern media with formats such as television, newspapers and magazines, media consumers was more or less solely reduced to being an audience. Since the development of media and introduction of new technologies, the audience has become more and more active. In todays society, most mobile phone owners not only consume media, they produce media. Being active and participate on different online platforms also means creating an online persona. Whereas Goffman (2014) talked about situated identities and how we can partake different modes of presenting ourselves, even before Internet, his theories are still applicable, however, the way we present ourselves online versus in real life offers different opportunities. The lines of what is public and private are becoming more blurred with the use of social media platforms and new technologies. With this in mind we can also observe new phenomena’s related to identity, self-representation and togetherness, arise.

The process of creating an identity starts in an early age, both individually and socially. From the moment we are born, we are divided into categories depending of our ethnicity, gender, religion and the colour of our skin etc. Thereafter, our identity is developed through our own experiences, our characteristics and encounters with other people. Later on, this is expressed in relationships and interactions with other people and communities (Jenkins, 200). This is called a social/collective identity, which we are given by other peoples perceptions of us and what groups we belong to, e.g. nationality, city, gender, age, profession and education. Moreover, there is a personal identity, which is our own perception of ourselves, what is unique to us and sets us apart from others with regards to our experiences and feelings (Gripsrud, 2011). Identity is thus a question of belonging in different areas – a merge of similarities and differences in relation to other people.
2.3. The need of belonging

S. Fiske (2004) argues, similar to Goffman (1959/2014) how human beings act and adjust our personality according to the environment and surroundings in order to feel the sense of belonging. Whereas it is at a work place, in a team, or in this case an online community, the need to belong is a fundamental for all human beings. S. Fiske (2004) describes this as a key to the human life. All individuals have a strong need to belong to a group or a community to feel a connection between themselves and others. To accomplish this everyone has to have a personal identity to either compensate or share their characteristics with other people.

Identity emphasizes the human role in a context; whom you identify yourself as puts you among others who identify themselves similarly. Identity is socially created roles we partake and thereafter becomes a part of our self-image where everything from hobbies, occupation and political beliefs contribute to the creation of identity. People often maintain standard norms and roles within these group structures to “fit in” because we are fundamentally motivated to belong to groups (S. Fiske, 2004).

2.4. The Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO)

Studies conducted by Goffman (1959/2014) and S. Fiske (2004) demonstrates how people adjust their behaviour and interactions in real life in order to fit in. In todays society, when we spend a significant amount of time to interact with other people over the internet, it is not only essential to feel belonging or connected to other people at work or at home, we also strive to feel connection and appreciated by our online peers. Couldry calls this togetherness (Couldry, 2012:256).

Being part of this togetherness, which is always on going due to our constantly connected lifestyle, also has its downside. The acronym FOMO stands for fear of missing out and is especially common amongst young adults who spend an immense amount of time on social media to check what “everyone else” is up to, e.g. what they are missing out on (www.forbes.com, 2014). Researches have found that the chase for likes and sense of appreciation is addictive and has been able to give a physical gratification in form of dopamine to the brain. The effect on the brain is comparable to what makes drug addicts use cocaine (psychologytoday, 2015). FOMO, as mentioned in the introduction, is a sense of having to be
constantly connected and take note of what everyone else is doing. The feeling of having FOMO means that you do not know exactly what you are missing out on when you are not online, but have a feeling that you are not allowed to participate and experience the fun. FOMO has been shown to play a negative role in people's well-being, as it is believed to trigger negative social and emotions such as boredom and loneliness through social media use (Turkle, 2011).

2.5. Situated identities

Goffman (2014) discusses our own creation and development of identity. He mentions the term impression management, which is a phenomena where individuals are trying to control how others perceive them, by changing the way they act, talk, express their face or clothing in order to conceal or reveal certain parts of their personality. In this case, our behaviour is determined by the situation, where we are and with whom (Goffman, 2014). In everyday life we engage in performances of the self in a way similar to actors portraying characters. This is the dramaturgical perspective on social behaviour which has become important in the social sciences and which is constantly explored in popular culture.

Furthermore, Goffman (2014) talks about “situated identities”. A situated identity is the self that can be identified with the role one is currently playing. They define us in reference to the role we are playing at a given time. We need to have our identity situated before we can proceed in an interaction, front stage and back stage. The front stage of our life performance, public identity, occurs in situations in which we interact with others in public or professional settings. In such performances we are constantly monitoring the impressions we give off to and make upon that audience. The private self knows that these performances are essential to identity and to the maintenance of the trust we place in routine social interaction. The most back stage behaviour occurs in one’s home environment where one can relax and be her or himself.

We create impressions through what Goffman (1977) calls sign vehicles, which includes both our language as well as our body language. We create impressions by our expressions. And there are two different kinds of expressions according to Goffman (1977):

1. The expressions we give, primarily the things we say, and the intentional poses, facial expressions (smiles, surprise, etc.) and other controlled body language we emit;
2. The expressions we give off, which are the elements of our expressiveness over which we have less control; the inconsistencies between what we say and what we actually do, the body language which “gives us away” in some situations.

2.6. Gender and social media

Gender is, as mentioned in the identity chapter, a part of our identity already at birth. How gender is represented in the media is the subject of many media studies. New communication technology, such as Internet and the mobile phone, forms new social environments and possibilities for interaction and therefore also new forms of representation. As gender representation in the media moves from traditional media such as television and magazines, studies on how the gender roles are displayed in digital media formats are increasing. As in social media in general, Instagram is a visual medium, especially when it comes to presenting yourself.

Y. Hirdman (2010) argues that biological sex is something you're born with while gender is something you are formed into (Hirdman referenced in Gender School, 2010). Gender theory is used to study the structures of power structure between women and men in the society, both online and in real life. The theory examines how notions of gender is constructed and how these structures are maintained in society. These properties are not genetically related to the biological sex but rather are we in society that accepts these constructed features and categorizations of male and female (Consalvo & Paasonen, 2002). A. Hirdman (2010) investigated the relationship between young men and women self-portraits snyggast.nu (roughly translated Best Looking) in Sweden. She argues that even though our physical body is not present, it still is imperative to the success of many interpersonal interactions that occurs over the Internet, not least in visual communication acts. An emerging form of communication between young adults on the Internet is the use of visual self-representation as a tool for symbolic interaction. A. Hirdman (2006) compares online visual representation to the gender representation in traditional media such as newspaper and magazines, arguing that all four Swedish magazines that was studied, most of the photographic material portrayed women. Additionally, a large proportion of the studied photographs emphasised body-ism as the visual representation of femininity, that is, a half or full-body perspective. Visual representation of men, on the other hand, emphasised a facial prominence, often accompanied with a stern and non-smiling facial expression. The men in the photographs on
Snyggast.nu often appear as absorbed in themselves leaving it to the viewer to figure out what he might be thinking or feeling. This visual distance in relation to the viewer, along with expressions of melancholy, sadness or non-engagement, appears to correlate with a version of heterosexual masculinity (A.Hirdman, 2010, p.9).

However, A. Hirdman’s findings in the study indicated that even if these visual strategies of aloofness an similar being a masculine trait and still are being presented in most of the images, new ways of presenting oneself has emerged during 2009. Even if they still rely on facial prominence to a high degree, self-portraits with naked upper bodies, undressing in front of a mirror and big smiling faces with the gaze directed outwards, previously exclusively seen in female portraits, are becoming more and more common even in the males images. Additionally, images of a more corporeal masculinity can be found, along with a more direct mode of address to the viewer, according to A. Hirdman (A.Hirdman, 2006:2010).

Wood (2009) argues that “What gender means depends heavily on cultural values and practices; a culture’s definitions of masculinity and femininity shape expectations about how individual men and women should communicate; and how individuals communicate establishes gender that, in turn, influences cultural views” (Wood, 2009, p. 20).

Similar to Wood (2009) and Y. Hirdman (2010) Harding (1986) claims that gender theory exists in several different levels and depths of society and within a particular culture. Gender is always around us and effects how we act or think. Gender roles appear as norms and ideologies in the society but also as more concrete structures. Additionally, Harding (1986) stresses that the concept of gender is dependent on the meaning of its context, in terms of historical, social or cultural. Harding divides gender into three dimensions in which she sees it as a cooperating process:

1. The first dimension is about the individual, how men and women are divided and brought up because of their biological sex.
2. The second dimension concerns the symbolic affiliated to a specific gender. The symbolic addresses norms on how to behave and what is expected of each sex.
3. The third and last dimension is about structures in society due to gender. Le how a man versus a woman relates to power and positions, at home or at work (Harding, 1986).
2.6.1. Gender and rhetoric’s of the body

From the historical background and evolution of gender theory, A. Hirdman (2001) investigates in *Tilltalande bilder* how the posing of the object in a photograph or in an image has an impact of photo’s message. The photographic image has always had a great role in the display and presentation of gender. Relevant for this study is the photos taken with mobile camera, often by the subject him or herself. A. Hirdman (2001) argues how body language, gestures, facial expression and smile are examples of expressions that build bonds between viewer and the subject. A smile is associated as something feminine, since it traditionally portrays women as unproblematic and easily accessible, focusing on the viewer’s appreciation. A turned away “busy” look on the other hand is a classic male pose that connotes status and belonging to a social elite. Additional body rhetoric connected to gender is the placement of the body in an image and possible self-touch. Furthermore, A. Hirdman (2010), investigated the framing of the subject in a picture, comparing the distance to the subject and how they communicate accordingly. The images can be divided into long-range, medium-range, close-up and extreme close-up. The distance to the person in the photograph or image distinguishes intimate, personal, social and formal/informal (A.Hirdman 2010, p.48). The context of the picture is crucial; a full body image, according to the theory, gives a more formal and impersonal appeal. Although, if it is a female body in full-length it gives an intimacy and feeling of closeness between the subject and the viewer. Additionally, the angle of the camera plays a major role. A picture taken with a bird’s eye view (from above) connotes the subject as small, whereas a photo taken from a frog’s perspective (from below) connotes the subject as powerful. This results in that the viewer either looks up or down at the subject, and their relationship is defined by this (A.Hirdman, 2001). Furthermore, A. Hirdman (2010) argues how communication oneself through photography can be seen as a form of symbolic interactionism, the process of interaction in the formation of meanings for individuals, where you can choose to eliminate and emphasise certain aspects of oneself (A. Hirdman, 2010, utwente, 2016)
2.7. Previous research on gender, identity and social media

There has been many studies and previous research with regards to gender and the media. However, it has mostly been investigated how men and women are portrayed in traditional media such as television and magazines. More recently, studies on gender representation on social media has started to occur, however it is still not a major research area, making it a research gap I would like to fill. Previous research about gender roles, media and social media are presented to give a background to the subject of this study.

2.7.1. Gendered images on Facebook

In the study *Face it: The Impact of Gender on Social Media Images*, Rose et. al (2012) studied how women versus men are stereotypically represented through their profile images on Facebook. A panel used a literature review of pictorial features associated with gender traits and a sample of 300 self-selected profile pictures on Facebook to assess gender stereotypes in Facebook images. As Rose et. al (2012) argues, gender identity and gender roles are a significant part of everyday life and society often promotes gender role markers as social norms through photographs and other visual displays used in advertising. A unique factor for digital formats is the possibility for individuals to explore the freedom of presenting a physical self that might differ from the self they perform in their everyday life or from socially defined expectations (Rose et al, 2012). Traits emerging in prominence in pictures of males included *active, dominant,* and *independent.* Those that were prominent with female users included *attractive* and *dependent.* These findings generally conform to gender stereotypes, and is therefore not surprising in light of cultural norms that convey to women from an early age that appearance and being attractive is important and can ultimately result in attaining social approval (Rose et al, 2012).

2.7.2. Self-presentation on Instagram

In a study Wendt (2014) analyses selfies on Instagram and argues how Instagram provides more ways for us to engage with our images than ever before, which feeds our selfie obsessions. Some of us are unaware of how much we rely upon Instagram and such apps to express ourselves and therefore do not recognize how our personalities and self-awareness change through its use. Wendt continues saying it is perhaps second to nature to pose and take pictures of oneself and to post them on Instagram (Wendt, 2014, p. 10). This is especially accurate when it comes to young adults, who grew up with these platform and sees this is *normal.* Instagram is designed to motivate other people to ‘like’ and comment on selfies which
enables images to communicate back to their creators (Wendt, 2014, p.20). Furthermore, Wendt argues that;

“As we tilt, raise, and lower our smartphones to find the best angle of ourselves on screens, we build perceptions about ourselves that are constructed purely from within screens. Instagram, thus, is not just a way to produce images but it is also and active means for some people to establish their identities – viewing the ubiquity of their selfies as a mark of distinction” (Wendt, 2014, p. 7).

Wendt (2014) compares the willingness to take pictures of ourselves with the old myth about Narcissus who was obsessed with his own reflection. According to Wendt, Narcissus was not in love with his own appearance but his reflection interested him because he did not recognize himself in the reflection. Wendt thinks that seeing a selfie of yourself has the same effect, because you view the picture before you see that it is you in it. The filter effect that Instagram offers also change your appearance additionally, which makes you more interesting to watch as you do not always recognize your own features, for example. Moreover, Wendt (2014) discuss identity creation on Instagram by selfies and claims that is a way to disengage from reality. Then we, similar to Narcissus, view ourselves from the “outside” it gives us a temporary break from reality. Selfies taken where the subject has closed eyes or looks away from the camera are also examples of when we want to see how others perceive us. We reinforce by this process and that is why we get satisfaction of taking and see the selfies, however, studies conducted by Wendt (2014) shows that the more frequently a user posts a selfie on her or his profile, the less likely it will get many likes. Wendt (2014) compares two common types of selfies on Instagram. The selfies can either be self-portraits, an invidid photographing herself in the mirror or looking directly into the camera. The second variety Wendt calls for "involuntary selfie" and is also a self-portrait but seemingly involuntarily, which is contradictory as it may be a self-taken and thus a conscious image, when the individual veil his or her face, for example, the hand, looking away or hiding behind the mobile screen. Wendt see this as a need for users to post pictures of herself and to constantly update their image, even though you do not want to be seen in detail. Additionally, Wendt (2014) discusses how different components in a selfie can contribute to the message sent out to the viewer, for example, wearing glasses and shielding the eyes from the camera lens can suggest that the subject desires distance and want to make the selfie less intimate (Wendt, 2014, p. 28).

Another study on the portraying on the self online was made by Lasén (2015) where he analysed the use of pictures to build and convey intimacy through social media interactions,
Badoo and Facebook, in Spain and England. The photographs mostly consisted of portraits and selfies. Lasén (2015) argues that disclosing selfies through social media entails three functions – presentation, representation and embodiment – which are seen necessary to address different publics. As Lasén puts it, “These photographs are forms of online presentation in front of a mixed audience of strangers, acquaintances and friends. They are gendered personal and public representations and performances of the self for oneself and for the others” (Lasén, 2015, p.64).

### 2.7.3 Filtered reality

One key factor that differences photos on Instagram to traditional photographs taken with a regular camera is the various filter options offered to the user. Wendt (2014) argues how many people are encouraged to rely upon the post-production process rather than the initial capture process itself. Instagram filters can radically change the lighting, colour, and contrast of the image in the press of a button, which alters the meaning of the original image. The filters can be applied to images in order to create a variety of visual effects. The user simply choses from a series of filter icons that represent various styles of analogue photography to transform the appearance of their photo, many of the filters artificially age images. Wendt (2014) says there are different reasons for adding a filter to an image and that they fill many functions, a black and white filter for instance creative a cold and distant feel, whereas a coloured filter adds warmth to the viewer. The filter can ultimately change the look of the user’s selfie, however, since it is only possible to add filters post-production, the final outcome might not be what the user originally intended. Furthermore, Wendt (2014) argues how the filters and hashtags we add to our selfies enhance our images and make them appear extraordinary to us. ‘Likes’ act as compliments, and users’ selfies become gifts to their networks and also provide them with personal validation (Wendt, 2014).

### 2.7.4. Engaging faces

Bakshi, Gilbert & Shamma (2014) states how photos are becoming prominent means of online communication. Having a scroll through an Instagram feed shows that faces are occurring in a majority of the photographs. In their study from 2014, one million Instagram posts were analysed and it was found that the face is a powerful tool in non-verbal communication to appeal to the viewer and get appreciation. The study furthermore came to the conclusion that the number of faces in the pictures, their age and gender did not have an
appreciable influence to get more likes or comments, however, the exposure of a face in itself is enough. Images of faces are 38 % more likely to get appreciation in the form of a "like", and 32 per cent more likely to get a comment than those without (Bakshi, Gilbert, Shamma, 2014). Using images of faces, no matter how many they are, therefore increases the likelihood of receiving likes and comments. The study is linking theories to the conclusion from offline studies on psychology, marketing and social behavior which all find that people are becoming more involved in images with faces on.

2.8. Conclusion theory & previous research

Theories and previous studies in this chapter show that the face and selfies do have an impact on identity creation on Instagram and other social media channels. Identity creation has developed and Goffman’s theories can still be applicable today however in some adjustment. Goffman (2014/1959) argued that individuals were concerned with self-representation during all social encounters, however, the way we encounter with other people today has developed along with new technology and social media.

3. Data and methodology

In order to be able to answer my research questions I have chosen to combine an overall quantitative analysis with a more in-depth semiotic analysis of a selection of the total data.

The quantitative analysis aims to answer the first research question; How do young adults represent themselves on Instagram? by identifying patterns in the data collection. For the second research question: Can differences be identified in the responses, i.e. likes and comments between young women and young men? And if so, how can these differences be described? a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis will be used. The combination of methods is to be able to identify both differences in the amounts of comments/likes but also putting these responses into context with an intertextuality analysis, to distinguish the similarities and differences between the photos and responses on a more detailed level. Finally, the last research question: Do young men and young women represent themselves differently on Instagram, if so, how? will be answered by qualitative analysis.

3.1. Quantitative analysis

To be able to answer my first research question: How do young adults represent themselves on Instagram? I have chosen to do a shorter quantitative analysis. According to Bryman (2007), a
quantitative method is a method that emphasizes the importance of quantity in the collection and analysis of data. A qualitative method focuses on the quality of the collecting material. The main difference between both methods is that the qualitative method focuses on words and embraces an interpretive approach, while the quantitative method emphasises analysing the numbers and generalisation of the data (Bryman, 2007: 34-35, 468-469). Another difference is that a quantitative scientist tries to keep a distance from his or her informants, while the qualitative researcher tries to get as close as possible to the informant to understand the whole picture and put it in its context (Bryman, 1997: 115-116). While conducting the quantitative analysis of the total data no details in the photos will be observed, this will instead be examined in the semiotic analysis.

3.2. Semiotic

To answer the third and last of my research questions: How do young men and young women represent themselves differently on Instagram? I considered a qualitative analysis to be the best option. For this part of the analysis, I have chosen Roland Barthes (1977) semiotic model as a method, both for text and image. Semiotic is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation and can be done on both image and text. According to semiotic studies, the message gets its meaning first when meeting with the recipient (J. Fiske: 1990: 12-14). The aim of the study is to investigate how young adults create an identity online and whereas these posts strengthen, weaken or replicate gender roles. By asking questions to the images according to the method I can investigate what the ideal, values, the location and person in the image stand for (Hansen & Machin, 2013). Sandby and Larsen (2013) suggest that we need to “look at photos not just as images but as material and social objects that mould and create identity and social relations between people” (Larsen & Sandby, 2013). By implementing this during my analysis I will be able to answer my research questions; how young adults represent themselves on Instagram and whether there are any difference between how young men and young women represent themselves through the popular social media channel. Moreover, it will allow me to identify the meaning of the findings as well. The semiotic analysis will be conducted through a gender and identity theoretical perspective, mentioned in the theoretical framework chapter. Other methods have been considered, however, I found semiotic to be the most suitable method due to its abilities to distinguish hidden messages both in text and images.

"Denotation is what is photographed, the connotation is how it is photographed"
(Barthes in Fiske, 1990: 119).
Barthes semiotic model has two steps, denotation and connotation, when it comes to method and theory. I have chosen to use the methodological part of semiotic and combine it with the theories from my theoretical framework when conducting the analysis. In the Analysis method chapter the analytical tools myth and intertextuality will be explained.

3.2.2. Denotation

The first step of Barthes analytical tool is to distinguish what we actually see. Denotation is the clear and obvious meaning of the character while the connotation is the subjective interpretation of the character. It might be a man driving a car or a family on a holiday trip. Denotation is thus asking the question: who, what or who is depicted here? This may include observing lighting, colour, camera focus and various items. According to Hansen and Machin (2013) it is surprisingly hard to find these denotations, but once they are found, they will be easier to get more precise interpretation of the material. According to Barthes, we can describe what is happening in the picture by looking at the denotative level. Thus, we can already at this level derive certain meanings in the picture. For example, whether a photograph of a person is alone or in a group of people. These kinds of observations will have an effect on how we see the people in the photograph (Barthes, 1977).

3.2.3. Connotation

The second level of meaning, Barthes calls connotation. This level explains the interaction of what we perceive and what it means, the deeper, underlying meanings of the image (Barthes, 1977). It is at this level the user's past cultural experiences and emotions play into how the character is perceived. Connotation is culturally conditioned and is regarded as arbitrary for culture. How the character is perceived, for example, depend on the viewer's gender, age, education and ethnicity etc. (Chandler, 2015).

In the connotative level the code is in the image and what perceptions and values that is represents. It is here that we see what is not seen in the first level, denotation. But once we understand what the image is, we can ask and determine what it means, therefore, is the connotative level depends on the denotativa level and vice versa.

Connotation is more subjective because we are not only influenced by the image or character, but also the interpreter of the character. One can make a comparison where the denotation is what has been photographed and the connotation is how it has been photographed. By trying
to understand the connotation of the picture, we can gain a deeper understanding of the codes that make up the image of what we see at first glance (Barthes, 1977).

3.3. Analysis method

Based on Barthes book *Music, text and image* (1977) are Hansens and Machins (2013) analytical tools, which I have chosen to implement for this study. The reason for my choice is due to the fact that Hansen and Machin (2013) in an understandable and applicable way demonstrates how Barthes methods can be used when it comes to analysing images. I have chosen some of their specific tools below that I find applicable for my study where you look at poses, the male gaze and positioning.

3.3.1 Poses

There is, according to Barthes (1977), a predetermined understanding of poses in our consciousness. These are often poses a support of connotative associations. As for example, when we see a police officer, we have some preconceptions of how a police officer should behave or move. He or she is strong, upright and so on (Hansen and Machin, 2013). This type of association can be described in a pose. A person standing like a police officer, upright and stable, may be associated with control and discipline, while a teenager who stands without any body posture may be associated with less control and disobedience (Hansen and Machin, 2013). A factor to take in consideration while studying poses is how much room the pose takes of the images full space. If the pose takes up much space, the person in the picture is associated with self-confidence and vice versa. If the pose takes up little space can also indicate that the person in the picture is arrogant and insensitive. Poses is an important analytical tool for ensuring the balance of power between the individuals in the picture, for example, if one individual takes up more space than the other people displayed in the picture it indicates that the person has more power (Hansen and Machin, 2013).

3.3.2 Male gaze

The concept *male gaze* was first introduced by Laura Mulvey (1975) in the article *Visual Please and Narrative Cinema*. Male gaze occurs when the viewer sees, for example, an image from a heterosexual male perspective. Mulvey (1975) says that it is the male that determines how things should be interpreted, meaning that it is the male norms that determine how we first interpret, for example, what a photograph is. Mulvey divides the *male gaze* into two models.
based on how the viewer looks at a woman. The first is that the woman is something to look at and the other is that the viewer sees her as a substitute in the absence of something else. Male gaze is an important analytical tool when it comes to seeing how the male his gaze is central to the interpretation of the image's message. The male gaze is ruling because the male is the current approach in theory (Mulvey, 1975). Even if this theory can be applied in studies regarding photographs on social media, the male gaze consist of three different gazes; of the person behind the camera, of the characters within the representation itself and of the spectator. As previously mentioned, photos on social media often consist of selfies, where the subject also is the photographer. Therefore the two first gazes discusses by Mulvey (1975) are the same. Moreover, the media industry has developed since Mulvey’s study. A. Hirdman (2010) discusses, as mentioned in the theoretical framework section, how the representation of the self has emerged recently amongst young adults. She claims that new forums for communication, such as the internet, offers new ways to present oneself, working towards old established strategies and patterns often still seen in traditional media such as newspapers and magazines. A. Hirdman found that an increasingly amount of self-portraits on the site Snyggast.nu portrayed young men with large smiling faces and with a gaze directed outwards, addressing and acknowledging the (female) viewer and create a scene based on her “participation” (A. Hirdman, 2010, p.9).

### 3.3.3 Positions

In terms of proximity and interaction, it is mainly about the distance, physical proximity and intimacy according to Hansen and Machin (2013). They also point out that the pictures from real life shows the distance on the social relationships between the participants; we stand close to people we like and keep a distance to people we do not like. This also has to do with intimacy. A picture taken close creates more intimacy whereas a long-distance picture creates more distance and gets less personal (Hansen and Machin, 2013).

### 3.3.4. Myth

Closely related to connotation is something Barthes called myths. A myth can be seen as the third level of analysis tools in semiotic, after denotation and connotation. Barthes argued that myths are dominant ideologies of our times and the result of the combination of connotation and denotation (Chandler, 2015). Codes and signs are created by myths but at the same time they help to strengthen and replicate them. Myths can be seen acting as metaphors in our culture, where they help us understand and interpret our experiences within our culture.
According to Barthes, myths work to neutralise codes and characters within a culture. Myths neutralise the dominant cultural values, beliefs and attitudes so that they are natural, obvious and arbitrary for all within the culture (Chandler, 2015).

In the third level the sign or object relies on larger cultural codes and ideologies such as masculinity, femininity, individuality and freedom (Chandler, 2015). In relation to this, the myth "masculine" and "feminine", where for example the notion that women are better suited to stay at home and take care of the children meanwhile the man is working and providing the family economically, is found. When investigating whether there are differences between young men and young women in terms of self presentation on Instagram, myths have a central role to be able to identify if stereotypical roles of masculinity and femininity are replicated or not.

3.3.5. Intertextuality

Barthes discussed intertextuality; how texts are talking with each other. He mentions how the caption of a photograph in a newspaper can tell the reader more than the picture itself and give the reader an idea of the context in which the image is in (Chandler, 2007). Barthes uses the concept of anchoring, which acts as a linguistic element to anchor (or limit) the text with the preferred readings of an image. Barthes used this example mainly relating to advertising images but it also applicable to other genres, such as cartoons and documentaries (Chandler, 2007).

Barthes argues that the anchoring principal function is ideological, which is seen most noticeable in the newspapers; the photograph is often considered to present a neutral and objective picture of reality, while the text under the picture tells us in words what we should see and how the image should be perceived (Chandler, 2007). It so helps to anchor the image meanings while minimizing different interpretations of the image. Barthes also talk about the relay, which is a term to describe the image of the text relative to the image as a complement rather than an anchor (Chandler, 2007). The caption helps complement and extend the picture meanings, such as comic books or storytelling movies. To answer my third and last research question; Can differences be identified in the responses, i.e. likes and comments between young women and young men? And if so, how can these differences be described? I will combine a qualitative method with an intertextual analysis to identify the possible differences on a qualitative level.
3.4. Problem with method

The chosen method entails certain risks when it comes to the interpretation of picture due to the fact that I am a product of my own culture with my own subjective reality. The same objective can be interpreted in different ways when factors like the culture we live in and the personal values come into play (Barthes in Fiske, 1990: 119). Therefore, I will break down the signs and codes in the collected data and analyse it on a denotative and connotative level.

3.5. Data collection and limitations

To be able to answer the research questions for the study, it is of importance to overview the patterns that can be find from viewing statistics of the total material and not solely the material chosen for the more detailed semiotic analysis. Therefore the first step of the selection process was to categorise the total material of 120 photos. After sorting out the twenty most recent posts from each user, that portrays the use, alone or together with other people, I categorised the total 120 images into nine themes according to the most dominating and frequent patterns. These nine themes were; selfie, friend/family photo, group photo, activity photo, collage, throwback, funny/goofy photo (i.e. printscreen from a Snapchat photo) and portrait of user taken by other person. Some photos did not fit in any of these categories and therefore I categorised them as other.

One theme was strikingly dominating amongst both gender: selfies, confirming theories that displaying the face in a photo increases the chances to get response from the follower base in terms of like and comments (Bakshi, Gilbert, Shamma, 2014). Since the main focus for this study is to identity the creation and young adults’ self-presentation online I therefore choose to focus on selfies only. This to be able to answer my research questions by identifying patterns and trends. For that purpose all the categories with the total material of 120 photos would be too large. The semiotic analysis will be conducted of the 74 selfies. Within the selfie theme there was also a popular subcategory; the mirror selfie which is a selfie taken in front of a mirror, often displaying a full or half body to the viewer. Of the total 74 selfies 23 were taken in a mirror.

The method to examine how young people create an online self by images and text in this study is semiotic as previously mentioned. The data collection consists of 20 photos from each users profile containing text and image, which brings the gross material to a total of 120 posts. Out of these 120 photos, 74 were selfies and these selfies are the material for the semiotic
analysis. To narrow down the material in order to be able to conduct the qualitative analysis the two selfies from each user with the most likes was included in the semiotic analysis.

The material was chosen with the purpose to find posts that contain people as well as some short text caption or an emoji to describe the photo. For the study the twenty latest posts by the user containing the user him or herself or with other people was chosen because the aim is to keep the material as recent as possible. Any posts not portraying the user him or herself was excluded in the data collection.

3.5.1. Data

All of the account users chosen for the study are Swedish nationals and use an open profile on Instagram, meaning that their posts can be viewed by anyone with an Instagram account and is also accesable through the website websta.com. Three of the users are female and three of them male, all in the age between 17 – 20 making it a total of six individuals; The accounts were found by browsing Instagram using the hashtag such as #studenten2016 and well-known high school in the Stockholm area, in order to find the target group. The first three female and the three first male accounts found where the user was still in high-school (confirmed by their account info or in one of the photos), had a total of at least 50 posts and a range between 150 – 650 followers and therefore matched the criteria, were chosen for this study. User accounts with less followers were excluded since their profiles often was not up to date and did not contain enough posts. User accounts with more than 650 followers were excluded since they often seemed to have a commercial interest in their profile and not only for personal purposes. The users additionally were required to have at least twenty posts featuring themselves, either a photo of themselves only or with other people.

In addition to the visual part of the posts, the photo itself, the caption, comments and emojis will be included in the analysis to place the photo in a context (Chandler, 2007).
3.5.2 Ethical issues

Instagram has an age limit of only 13 years old, however, a problem addressed by Instagram Helpcenter is the emergence of fake account set up by underage children. Under Instagrams’ About us page they have a Legal section called *Children’s privacy;*

> Instagram does not knowingly collect or solicit any information from anyone under the age of 13 or knowingly allow such persons to register for the Service. The Service and its content are not directed at children under the age of 13. In the event that we learn that we have collected personal information from a child under age 13 without parental consent, we will delete that information as quickly as possible. If you believe that we might have any information from or about a child under 13, please contact us (Instagram, 2016).

Another ethical dilemma with studying young adults on social media is that even though it is legal for anyone to use images posted on a public Instagram profile, one still most consider the fact that these persons are still young adults who might not have realise what consequences posting images online might have. Many cases of when young, mostly girls, have posted semi-nude pictures of themselves has ended up in the wrong hands have been acknowledged in the media. For this study all the users has been contacted which images are included in the analysis to ask for their consent. Unfortunately none of them replied, the reason might be that direct messages from other Instagram users can be easy to overlook. Therefore I have chosen to anonymise the users by not displaying the material in the text or appendix and refer to the users with fictive names in the analysis. The female users will be referred to as Anna, Emma and Sarah. The male users will be referred to as Alex, Tom and Eric.

3.5.3. Limitations

For the data collection only photos portraying the user him or herself with our without other people was included. A picture that does not include the user was excluded. To ensure the result is as current and valid as possible the users twenty latest posts with this criteria has been chosen for the analysis. To be able to answer my research questions and conduct the semiotic analysis the total material of 120 posts had to be narrowed down as described in the data collection chapter. Finally, a material of 74 selfies remained for the quantitative analysis and of these, the twelve posts with most likes were chosen for the semiotic analysis.
Despite the ability to upload both photos and videos on Instagram the data for this study is limited to still images, in order to be able to collect a wider range of photos, rather than a few videos.

3.5.4. Analysis process

The result and analysis part of the study aims to answer the three research questions, with a combination of quantitative and a more in-dept qualitative analysis. As an introduction to the result chapter the first research question will be discussed, how young adults present themselves on Instagram by looking at the total amount of selfies, followers and likes, presented in the quantitative part of the result chapter.

Thereafter the analysis will continue with research question two and three, if there are any differences in how young men contra young female present themselves and if there are any differences in the responses they are given. These questions will be answered by the semiotic analysis. The data is divided into female/male and the two posts from each user will be analysed separately, starting with the denotative and then the connotative level. To be able to distinguish the differences, analytical tools such as intertextuality, poses, gaze, proximity and interaction will be used in order to answer the research questions.

Finally, the analysis results from both male and female users material will be discussed in a summary and lastly a conclusion.
4. Research results and analysis

4.1 Selfie as self-presentation

In this introductory section of this chapter, the results from the quantitative part of the selfies are presented. Thereafter a short discussion regarding how these numbers reflects on the young adults presentation of the self on Instagram can be identified follows. Finally the qualitative analysis of the two most liked selfies from each user is conducted.

The categorisation of the overall data collection showed that young adults present themselves dominantly through selfies on Instagram, the female users had 42 selfies and the male 32 selfies, making it a total of 74 selfies. The female users were more prone to use filters on their selfies, which indicates they put more time and effort in their selfie and the presentation of themselves, than the male users. All six selfies posted by the female users except one had a filter added before posting. For the male user’s selfies, only two selfies had an added filter. Both male and female users presented themselves through mirror selfies as well, a selfie taken in the reflection of the mirror. This enables the user to include the body in the selfie and not just the face.

**Table 4.1. Selfie presentation on Instagram (in numbers)**
Table 4.2 shows that from the 74 selfies, the female users were clearly overrepresented in terms of amount of likes, even though the total amount of selfies between the two gender were not vast. This can be explained by the fact that the female users together had almost double the amount of followers as the male users. The user with the least amount of followers had 188 and the user with most followers had 714, both of them female. The male user with most followers had 319 and the male user with least had 222 followers. Although, the male users had more likes in relation to the amount of followers, than the female users. This can be explained by the validity of the followers, if they are fake accounts or actual followers or inactive followers who does not check their Instagram feed often. Therefore it is necessary to do a qualitative analysis as well, of the selfies, captions and comments, putting the photo into an intertextual context (Barthes, 1977).

Table 4.2. Likes and followers on Instagram (in numbers)

![Bar chart showing likes and followers for male and female users](chart.png)

4.2.1 How young men and women present themselves on Instagram

Out of 120 pictures posted by the young adults in this study 74 of them were selfies, more half of the total. This means that every other photo of the user displaying him or herself with our without someone else, is a selfie. Twelve of these will be included in the semiotic analysis, the two selfies with most likes from each user. To distinguish similarities as well as differences between the selfies and identify any correlation between gender and themes the analysis will be broken down into three segments as per the chosen qualitative analysis method. Firstly the selfies are presented on a denotative level, thereafter connotative and lastly in the myth category. In each category the male users and female users will be analyses separately at first and thereafter summarised.
4.3. The male selfie – Denotation, connotation and myth

4.3.1. ALEX

4.3.1.1 Denotation

Mirror selfie
Alex most liked selfie is half-body and taken in front of a mirror. Judging by the background and environment he is standing in a hallway in his or a friend’s home, however he does not seem to be on his way out since he has his back is turned against the front door, he is not wearing a jacket and his hand is put in the front pocket of his jeans. He holds his mobile in the other hand, tilting the mobile down, facing the mirror. His gaze is downward as well, as he is looking on himself at the mobile phone screen and not in the mirror. Even though we cannot see below his knees it looks like his feet are wide apart. He is wearing a white piké t-shirt. The photo is quite dark and we cannot really distinguish the expression in his face. The photo is posted without any added filter and does not have any caption but an umbrella emoji. The photo does not have any comments.

Birthday selfie
Alex second most liked photo is taken outside. He is wearing a white piké t-shirt similar to the one on the first selfie. He is looking down on the viewer, into the camera. Behind him we can see big white clouds on a blue sky, a hint of a crown of a tree and also something that looks like the underneath of roof of a house. He is not wearing a jacket, which indicates that it is rather hot outside. The photo is bright and we can clearly see his face and upper half of his upper body. His forehead is frowned and he also squints his eyes a bit. The caption says “18” and a balloon emoji. The post has no added filter.

4.3.1.2 Connotation

Mirror selfie
Alex relaxed pose and body language in the mirror selfie gives the viewer associations that he is confident (Hansen and Machin, 2013). He has one hand tucked into the front pocket of his jeans which indicates that he is not in any hurry and is comfortable in the situation. He is standing wide apart with his legs, taking up much space in the photo, which confirms this radiance of confidence even more. Furthermore, his gaze downwards at the viewer signalises that he feels in control and makes him look even more confident. The fact that the photo is
taken with some physical distance to the viewer and does not show much effort to making eye contact with the viewer creates a physiological distance to the viewer and makes it become less personal (Hansen and Machin, 2013). The umbrella emoji indicates that it is raining outside, and that might be why he is inside. Since there are no comments on the photo Alex gets the validation and confirmation for his photo in terms of the many likes.

**Birthday selfie**
In the second photo, which is a more close up of Alex, we can clearly see his face and he is looking into the camera, making eye contact with the viewer. This type of close-up photo creates an intimate feeling, similar to how we prefer to stand close to people we like in real life (Hansen and Machin, 2013). The eight comments are simply “Congratulations” followed by smiling emojis and balloon emojis.

**Summary**
Alex choice of environment, poses and no usage of filters indicate that he posts his selfies simply to document his everyday life. This gives the impression that he feels a sense of belonging amongst his followers on Instagram, sharing his daily activities, not with the purpose to impress or exceed his real life persona. Not sharing or displaying emotions connotes with typical constructed masculine traits (A.Hirdman, 2010). Since the comments do not reveal what the followers think about his posts, he probably gets his confirmation and validation from the likes. Another option is that he does not care much about how his selfies are received, but simply uses the posting of himself on Instagram as some sort of diary.

### 4.3.2. TOM

#### 4.3.2.1. Denotation

**The gaze selfie**
In this selfie, Tom is standing outside, judging by the blue sky in the background. He is wearing a jacket and underneath the jacket we can see the collar of a navy blue t-shirt. He looks slightly down at the viewer and has headphones in his ears. The photo is quite dark and he has not used any filter before posting it. The image does not have a caption, however it does have ten comments.
Sofa selfie

In this selfie, Tom lies in a sofa, dressed in a navy blue sweatshirt and holding the mobile phone with his left arm. His gaze is into the camera, slight downwards to the viewer. The sofa is beige and the photo does not show much of any other interior other than a speaker, as he is talking of most of the photo himself.

4.3.2.2 Connotation

The gaze selfie

In the gaze selfie Tom is getting very close to the camera, making eye contact with the viewer. Since the photo is quite dark we cannot really see his eyes. However, the closeness of the photo creates a feeling of intimacy with Tom, as we can not see much else from the surroundings other than him and the blue sky and his pose is taking up most of the photo (Barthes, 1977). Wearing headphones indicates that he is taking the photo casually, while he is outside listening to music, probably going somewhere. By not adding any text or emoji caption to the photo he leaves the viewer clueless as of what he is doing or where he is going. This might be a technique to keep the viewer interested, or he simply just wanted to post a photo to get confirmation for his looks. The later option is confirmed by the comments when commencing the intertextual analysis. Not one of the ten comments are regarding what he is up to or where he is going. They are all complementing him on his look; “Sexy” “Cute” “Sexy as hell” are only a few of the comments. Tom does not reply to say thank you to any of these, which can connote to typical manly traits of not being stern and not showing emotions (Hirdman, 2010:2006), and also that he might not want to admit that he posted a photo for superficial reasons, which could indicate him being vain.

Sofa selfie

In the selfie where Tom lies on the sofa and looks into the camera wearing a sweatshirt he gives the viewer an intimate feeling of being invited to his home and private sphere, however, he still keeps some distance by looking slightly down on the viewer. The selfie does not have any text caption, only a cryptic emoji, leaving the meaning of the pose up to interpretation for the viewer. However, the response is positive from his followers with comments complementing him on his looks, from both male and female users. One male user
Summary

Overall Tom seeks attention and confirmation from the viewer in his selfies, as he looks into the camera in both photos, making eye contact with the viewer. Albeit, he does keep a certain distance by looking down at the viewer. When reading the comments they also confirm that he might be seeking approval for his looks, where most of them are affirmations such as “what a hottie”, “so cute” etc. from both male and female followers. These comments can work as a trigger for Tom to post more and similar selfies to get the same amount of attention and appreciation, even if he does not want to admit it openly. This urge to withhold constant confirmation from fellow Instagram peers can be as addictive as drugs (psychologytoday, 2015). However, when reading the comments from the male users, they seem slightly ironic reminding of a jargon which suggests that they know each other from before and are not only online peers. This speaks to the fact that Tom might not aim to create a separate online persona, rather withhold and reinforce the image he has amongst his friends and classmates in real life.

4.3.3 ERIK

4.3.3.1. Denotation

Music selfie
In this mirror selfie we can see Erik in half-body, holding his mobile phone with his arms tight together, wearing a cap and sunglasses and making an excited expression with his mouth open. In the background we see instruments and the caption reveals that he has succeeded with his vocal sessions, hence the excitement. He is wearing a white t-shirt and black pants.

Lyrics selfie
In this selfie we only see a part of Erik’s face in a close up and a flowery wallpaper in the background. He is wearing headphones and the captions says “Deep lyrics” with the hashtag #flowerywallpaper. A lightning coming from the side of the photo suggests that he is sitting next to a computer.
4.3.3.2 Connotation

Music selfie
Erik is standing with his feet close together which makes him look a bit insecure compared to if he would stand with his feet wide apart. He is holding the phone with both his hands, which can be an attempt to make his body look skinnier, as we can see by the size of his hands he does not need both of them to hold up the phone. His mouth is open and he looks excited the caption says “after yesterday’s vocal session my vocal cover is now up on YouTube, visit my Facebook and check it out” symbolising that he is proud of his performance. In the background of the photo we also can see many instruments, which confirms his interest in music even more. Wearing sunglasses, even though he is inside, indicates that he wants to keep a distance towards the viewer.

Lyrics selfie
As the lyric selfie is taken in a close-up and Erik is making eye contact with the viewer, it is much more intimate and inviting than the previous selfie. Whereas he was promoting his music and performance in the mirror selfie, he is opening up to a more personal and relaxed version of himself in this photo, although he still keeps some distance by not displaying his full face. He is presumably sitting in his home, judging by the wallpaper, and listens to music from the computer. The hashtag deeplyrics indicates that he likes the music he is listening to. He got only one comment on this photo, a female user who comments on the flower wallpaper. Erik has not responded to this comment.

Summary
Adding the captions for Mike’s selfies confirms the theory that he wants to present himself not only by the way he looks but also his personality and thoughts. This is also confirmed by his choice of not using filters in his selfies before posting them on his profile. In the selfie where he is wearing his headphone the caption says “deep lyrics” indicating that he is listening to music and both his most liked selfies include music, both in terms of instruments and the captions. Erik’s post indicates that he wants to appear as he is confident and proud of his accomplishments, however, his pose in the mirror selfie indicates that he is somewhat insecure. He does not get much interaction on his posts but still keeps on posting, suggesting that he might not post only for confirmation and validation from others, maybe for his own documentation as well.
4.4. The female selfie – Denotation, connotation and myth

4.3.1. ANNA

4.3.1.1. Denotation

Spring time selfie
In this selfie Anna is inside the toilet, judging by the toilet roll holder hanging on the wall. The photo is taken from above, making her look up into the camera, her gaze directed at the viewer, putting her in an inferior position. Her facial expression makes her look anxious. The caption to her photo says “Spring is here” and the hashtags are #springfeeling #springclothes #love and the photo has two comments, one of them written by Anna herself. She is wearing an army jacket and we cannot see what she is wearing from the waist down. Her long, blonde hair is let out and rest on one side of her shoulders.

School bathroom selfie
Anna looks into the camera, her long blond hair is let out, resting on her shoulders. She is standing in a public toilet, probably at school judging by the stack of books and notebooks laying behind her on a bench. The photo is taken from above, making her look up into the camera, her gaze directed at the viewer. She is wearing a cropped white t-shirt and a baseball jacket widely open, making her belly clearly visible to the viewer as well as her piercing in the bellybutton. The filter she has added is slight yellow and the overall image is quite dark. The photo does not have any text caption but only a heart shaped emoji.

4.4.1.2. Connotation

Spring time selfie
In the photo taken from inside the toilet, facing the mirror, Anna’s face looks anxious and insecure, which can signal that she wants approval from the viewer. The filter she added is green/blue and gives the photo a cold feeling. The photo has received two comments, saying “hot” which she replies to saying “you are” followed by a heart shaped emoji, indicating that she knows the girl who commented, from before. The comments do not have any real relation to the caption about spring time and spring clothes. Anna might be posing this selfie in order to get affirmation from her followers, as a more natural post regarding spring feelings and weather would have been taken outside and not inside a toilet. Her hashtags about love and
spring clothes and the red rose emoji connotes to female traits of love and having an interest in clothes and appearance.

**School bathroom selfie**

In the photo taken in what is assumingly the school toilet, Anna looks up into the camera and not into the mirror. She is showing off her midriff in a cropped white t-shirt and the hand that is free from holding the mobile phone she holds like a fist. This indicates that she wants to be appear to be in control of the situation. Tilting the camera from above can make your body appear smaller and slimmer, which symbols that she is conscious about her appearance. A front door to the toilet area is seen in the background, which indicates that she is comfortable in the situation, otherwise she might have been nervous that someone could walk in on her. For post production she has chosen a yellow toned filter which makes the photo look warm and her hair almost golden, compared to the other photo which is colder and her hair looks more ashy blonde. The caption for the photo is not more than a heart emoji leaving it up to the viewer to interpret the context. She has received nine comments which are all complementing her on her beauty, she replied to all of them saying thank you and things like “you’re the best” and “what about you?”, followed by heart shaped emojis. This indicates that she appreciates the feedback she is given on her posts and they work as validation for her along with the likes (Wendt, 2014).

**Summary**

Both of Anna’s most liked selfies are quite similar in terms of environment and posing. Both are mirror selfies and she is holding the camera above her head, making her look up at the viewer, putting him or her in the more powerful position. This might not be the intension for Anna, another reason for taking a photo from above and not from below is to make the body look slimmer. Since she is showing off her midriff in the second selfie it indicates that she is self-concious about her body and wants other people to notice it. The fact that she had added filters to both photos also indicates that she is conscious about making herself look as good as possible. However, we can see that the photo were she shows more skin and has added a warm looking filter got more confirmation and affirmations, in terms of uplifting comments. In both photos her gaze is into the camera and not into the mirror; her facial expression is looking a bit anxious. This anxiety can be seen as an attempt to get response from the viewer, which she does get in comments complimenting her looks as well as in the amount of likes.
4.4.2. EMMA

4.4.3. Denotation

Piercing selfie
Emma’s two most liked photos is one mirror selfie and one regular selfie. In the regular selfie we see her face and the upper part of her upper body, as the photo is taken from below. She is wearing a sleeveless grey top and the band from her black bra is showing on her right shoulder. The left shoulder is hidden because she is holding her left hand up to what seems to be the armrest of a chair, making her body slightly tilted towards the camera. She is looking into the camera and her mouth is open and she is biting her tongue, which is pierced. In the background we see a TV on the wall and clothes on a bed, suggesting that she is at home, maybe in her bedroom. Her short brown hair is let out and tucked behind her ear on one side and on the other side it is covering parts of her eye. The caption of the image says “fuck or fight, or both?” and has six comments.

Mirror selfie
In the mirror selfie Emma does not wear any clothes from what the viewer can detect. The photo is cropped just above her bust and her shoulders are naked. Her gaze is slightly looking down and into the camera. She is holding the phone with her left hand and it is tilted downwards. In the background we see a room and a mirror hanging in the middle of the wall, in what appears to be a bathroom. Her hair is put together in a braid, except a strand of hair that covers one side of her face, the side facing the viewer.

4.4.3.1 Connotation

Piercing selfie
This is a “voluntary selfies” she does look into the camera, slightly downwards, indicating that she is confident and that she sees herself as powerful compared to the viewer. Keeping the lips slightly separated and biting her tongue gives the photo an inviting feeling. Displaying her tongue piercing symbols that she might want to give the viewer an indication of that she is though, having a piercing in her tongue at a very young age. Tilting her shoulder back towards the armrest while she is tilted the other side of her body towards the camera makes her body look slimmer and indicates that she is conscious about her looks. The caption for the photo “fuck or fight, or both?” connotes that she is not shy and very outspoken considered her follower base of 714 people. The comments are from two females and one male, all of them
encouraging with heart shaped emojis and another with the hashtag #knullbråka (#fuckfight). The male user comment reads “the perfect combination between fuck and fight” and Emma replies to him “haha, yes isn’t it” showing that she appreciates his comments.

**Mirror selfie**

In the photo where Emma hides her eyes from the camera lens, behind her hair and turns her face away from the camera so we can only see one side of it, can be seen as an "involuntary selfie" that indicates a need to post pictures of herself and to constantly update her image, even though she does not want to be seen in detail. Shielding the eyes from the camera also indicates that Emma seeks distance from the viewer and wants to make it less intimate (Wendt, 2014, p.28). She has cropped the photo below her bare shoulders, leaving it up to the viewers imagination to decide whether she is wearing clothes or not below. Though she gives the viewer and inviting feeling by looking into the camera and leaning towards the lens with her body, she does look slightly down on the viewer, making her look confident and superior towards him or her. The caption for the photo is “teach me everything you know, Baloo” which presumably refers to the movie The Jungle Book (1967).

**Summary**

Emma’s both selfies indicates that she is self-conscious about her body. In the selfie taken in her bedroom her hand rests on the armrest and her body is tilted towards the viewer, making it appear slimmer. In the mirror selfie she looks a bit tense as if she is trying to pose to the camera, pouting her lips. Pouting with the lips and putting the body in a position to make is enjoyable for the viewer to watch is associated with traditional studies on female traits (Hirdman, 2006:2010). Even though Emma’s selfies fits in on these criteria’s she still does not look passive or dependent in her poses, rather self confident and in control, taking up large space of the total image and having a straight back and firm gaze (Barthes, 1977).

However, Emmas close-up selfie comes more into context when adding the caption and the comments. Her caption in the close-up signals that she wants to give the impression of being confident and in control of the situation, still reaching out for approval. The other caption for the mirror selfie “teach me everything you know, Baloo” can be seen as a referral to the movie The Jungle Book (1967) where Baloo teaches the orphaned young boy Mowgli everything he knows about living in the Jungle. This indicates that she is open-minded and adventurous and should not be judged only by her looks.
4.4.4. SARAH

6.4.4.1 Denotation

**Work out selfie**
Sarah’s most liked selfies is one mirror selfie and one regular selfie. In the mirror selfie we cannot see her face, only her body, from behind. The camera is directed in front of the mirror and she is standing on the side, twisting her back towards the mirror and camera lens. Judging by the background she is standing in her bathroom and according to her clothes she is going, or has been to, the gym. She is wearing black exercise tights and a black vest. Her long blonde hair is let out and lies resting on her shoulders.

**The purrfect selfie**
In the second selfie she is laying under a blanket with earphones in her ears. We can see her face and the upper part of her upper body, the chest is covered by the blanket but her décolletage is visible. She is wearing a navy blue top and her long blond hair is let out. She is looking into the camera with one eyebrow somewhat raised and gives the viewer a subtle smile. The caption says “the sun and the blanket makes my day #purrrfect”.

4.4.4.2. Connotation

**Work out selfie**
Sarah’s face is hidden from the viewer, and the viewer can only see her body. This qualifies the photo as an “involuntary selfie”, where the user is hiding her face (Wendt, 2014). As this selfie is one of Sarah’s most liked selfie it goes against theories that a photo displaying the face gets more likes and comments than a photo not displaying the face (Bakshi, Gilbert, Shamma, 2014). The likes might instead work as a validation for the context of the photo. Adding the caption, which consists of a flexed arm emoji and an emoji with water drops, presumably symbolising sweat dropping from the flexed arm, in combination with her work out clothes outfit, signals that she seeks affirmation for her performance at the gym. Although, the photo is not taken in the gym but in a home environment, and the photo does not display her doing any activity. She might use this selfie to showcase what she has accomplished at the gym; a toned and slim body, desired by many women. One could compare to the equivalent male work out “show off” selfie that often displays a very muscular body.

This is also confirmed when analysing the comments. Three different male users have left encouraging comments such as “Wow, well done girl” and “keep up the good work”. The
third comment has no text but shows his appreciation in terms of an emoji with applauding hands and the emoji of a princess wearing a crown, indicating that Sarah reminds her of a princess. Comparing Sarah to a princess also replicated constructed gender roles and myths of masculinity and femininity (Barthes, 1977), where the girls are pretty princesses and boys are brave princes. Sarah do seem to appreciate being compared to a princess as she is replying to the comments saying “thank you”.

**The purrrfect selfie**

In the blanket selfie Sarah looks straight into the camera, making eye contact with the viewer. She looks very relaxed and the photo connotes that she is calm and content. Being very close to the camera and making eye contact makes the photo very intimate, as she wants to be close to the viewer (Hansen & Machin, 2013). The caption saying “the blanket and the sun makes the day” connotes to female traits of being happy and content which also is confirmed by the activity of “getting cosy” underneath a blanket (A.Hirdman, 2010). The hashtag #purrfect might refer to the sound a cat makes when you cuddle with it and indicates that she likes cats and is caring, which also can be seen as a feminine trait (A.Hirdman, 2010). The comments are all of positive nature and complements on Sarah’s beauty and the last commenter says “it is the girl who makes the picture”. Sarah’s response to the comments shows that she appreciates the confirmation she is given.

**Summary**

From Sarah’s two most liked selfies it appears that she is conscious about her appearance. She gives the impression of a good self-esteem and confidence. In her first photo, the mirror selfie she is clearly doing a pose, taking of the centre stage of the image (Barthes, 1977). The face does not show, which indicates that she seeks validation for her performance (going to the gym and keeping fit) and posts a selfie even though she don’t want to show her face, maybe to keep her Instagram followers up to date (Wendt, 2014). In the second selfie she is closer to the viewer and the photo has a more intimate and calm feeling. Laying on a blanket makes with her let out makes her look very relaxed and content.
4.5. The male vs. the female selfie

From the selfies that was part of this study it showed that poses had an impact on how the subject appears to the viewer. The male users more often seemed relaxed, confident and superior in their poses compared to the female users (Hansen & Machin, 2013). All of the male users selfies were also taken with the mobile phone slightly tilted up from below, making it seem like they are looking down on the viewer. This makes the object look powerful towards the viewer. The female users in some cases looked up, making eye contact with the viewer from below, which puts them in an inferior position. The females were also seen closer to the camera, which creates intimacy and an urge to be close to the viewer, just like in our real life relationships (Hansen & Machin, 2013).

The male users selfies gave the impression of them being “caught in the moment” – relaxing on the sofa, standing in the corridor at school or in the hallway at home. The female users selfies looked more staged and thought through, with poses that did not always look natural. The fact that the female users more often added filters to their selfies confirms this as well. This was also confirmed by the intertextuality analysis, when the captions and comments were taken into the context.

Seeing that the female users most often posted their selfies indoors, and often in a home environment replicates constructed cultural myths about women being passive and at best suited in the home environment. This while the male users more often posted selfies from outdoors, or when doing activities, which connotes the man as being active and a provider (Barthes, 1977). The intertextuality analysis of the captions of the female users selfies showed that traits associated with femininity such as happy, love and feeling content was often communicated with the photos. The male selfies intertextuality analysis on the other hand did not display many emotions; the captions were most often objective, containing only emojis and no text. This is associated with masculine traits of not exposing your feelings or to be too emotional. Furthermore in the intertextuality analysis of the comments, gendered roles were replicated, for example in Toms comment where one male user writes “You are the king, Tom” whereas Sarah receives a comment with an emoji indicating that she is a princess with a pink dress and a crown. This connotes to old cultural codes of masculinity and femininity.

However, compared to previous studies on gender representation in traditional media (Hirdman, 2010) we can see the gender roles somewhat emerging. Whereas men previously
was most presented through face only images and female through their bodies, in this material we see men taking mirror, full- or half-body selfies and female taking photos only displaying their faces. Also, even though the female users showed more skin in their full body selfies than the male users, it was in active poses and dressed in i.e. gym clothes, and not passively lying in a bikini on a beach waiting for the approval from a man.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Even though users for this study may not purposely aim to create new acquaintances or display their profile to people to them unknown, their open profiles and photos do send indicate who they are and what life they are living. Social media gives the user the ability to manage and control the way they present themselves in a different way compared to how to control their presentation in face-to-face situations. All of the chosen and posted pictures are taken privately but displayed to the public. The users can therefore choose themselves how they want to be seen and create an online identity, consciously or subconsciously.

How do young adults present themselves on Instagram?

Previous studies have shown how human beings adjust their personality according to the environment and surroundings, in order to fit in and belong. This goes for public spaces such as an office or a school as well as in an online community like Instagram (S. Fiske, 2004, Goffman, 2014). The young adults who were objects for this study are clearly showing a need to belong with their Instagram profiles, posting photos that from what this analysis found only generated positive comments and the repeatedly posting of similar posts indicates that the user appreciates the response they are given (S. Fiske, 2004).

The most popular way for the young adults in this study to present themselves are as mentioned in term of a selfie. Supposedly because selfies, or simply photos that include faces, generates more likes and interaction than any other type of photo (Bakshi, Gilbert, Shamma, 2014) When the user gets a large amount of likes it can work as a personal validation for him or her (Wendt, 2014). Since the comments analysed in this study indicates that the followers and subject know each other from before it is possible that the users online persona is not entirely different from their real life persona. However, the post-production possibilities, such as filters, may change the initial intention the user had of the photo.
Can differences be identified in the responses, i.e. comments between young women and young men? And if so, how can these differences be described?

As seen in the introduction to the result chapter and the quantitative analysis, the female users got more affirmation from their followers, in terms of comments and likes. One obvious reason could be the fact that the female users had almost double the amount of followers compared to the male users. However, the male users had more likes in relation to their followers, as displayed in Table 4.2. This can be explained by the validity of the followers, if they are fake accounts or actual followers or inactive followers who do not check their Instagram feed often. Therefore it is necessary to do a qualitative analysis as well, of the selfies, captions and comments, putting the photo into an intertextual context (Barthes, 1977).

The female users posted more selfies that revolved around the looks, their bodies and overall appearance leading to them receiving affirmation for this as well. Replying positively to these comments shows that they appreciate the confirmation and validation they were given. Responding to comments is something that was common for the female users but not the male users, as displayed in Appendix 2 (Wendt, 2014). Although, in some cases the intertextuality analysis spoke against this presentation of the female users according to constructed feminine gender roles as passive and dependent, where their captions instead indicated that they are adventurous and outspoken (Hirdman, 2006:2010).

The result showed that the male users were also seeking approval from their followers, however they might want to show this as openly as the female users, as it is not seen as masculine to appear as vain or insecure. One of the male users who got many compliments and validation for his appearance did not once respond to these comments. However, continuously posted the same type of selfies indicates that he does appreciate the confirmation he is given.

How do young men and young women represent themselves differently on Instagram?

For this study the findings were that both the male and female users was seeking approval for their looks in their selfies. However, the female users got more validation for their photos in terms of likes comments on their posts than the male users. If this is because their selfies are more visual appealing is uncertain. Previous studies on gender representation has shown that women are more often presented and judged by their looks, than men (Hirdman, 2010). This might lead to that it comes naturally for men to validate women, in this case by pressing the “like” button.
6. Conclusion

In this study I have examined the self-representation of young men and women in Sweden on six various Instagram accounts, using theories of media, identity and gender. Furthermore I investigated whether differences between genders could be identified in terms of how they present themselves and how the viewer perceives their posts, by analysing likes, captions and comments.

In the qualitative semiotic analysis an in-depth approach was taken, factors such as posing, angles and gazes in consideration. When the image caption and comments was added to the context analysis of the post, the overall meaning of the photo was sometimes changed; in other cases it only confirmed what seemed to be communicated visually, without the caption.

The young men were seen as dominant and active to a greater extent in the photos whereas the young women were seen as more passive and dependent. Even if the traditional stereotypical image of gender roles often were reproduced there were also several cases when the conventional patterns were broken. In these cases we see female users represent themselves according to male poses and male users according to female stereotypical poses and myths, e.g. women showing off their body but not in a passive way, connoting that they are in control. Additionally we might see this development as a reflection of the gender equality discussion taking place in the society today, where women claims the right to decide over their bodies and display them without being judged by men.

Therefore it would be interesting to do a wider study with a larger material to distinguish if these exceptions are occasional or becoming a trend amongst young adults on social media today. One explanation to this can be a reflection to the growing idea of people to be identified as individuals, for their persona, and not for their gender.

When commencing the study I had the assumption that the young people who were included in the research all created an online persona on their Instagram account. Since I do not know them in reality or have interviewed them I cannot draw any conclusion from how their online persona on Instagram is different from their real life persona. However, what did occur to me is that maybe there is not an online persona versus real life persona for these young adults, instead it is only a distinction of what is private and what is public. Public can be at school with your friends, in a public space, or on social media. Private is where you are alone or only
with close family or friends. Similarly to what Goffman (2014/1959) calls *front stage* and *back stage* (Goffman, 2014/1959).

Even if they all had open profiles visible to anyone with an Instagram account, the posts seemed to be posted primarily to peers, people they already know, judging by the interaction and the comments. The confirmation and approval and obtainment of it were mostly given by people who seemed to be friends or acquaintances from real life. If this is a dialogue continued from an offline conversation or a way to make contact with new people they might not have the courage to talk to in real life, is a question yet to be answered.

### 6.1. Future research

The result of this study did not come out as I expected when first starting. The results also show that social media platforms and the ability to communicate through them are evolving and developing rapidly, especially amongst the young adults and teens. Even though likes, captions and comments were included in the analysis I would also include filters in consideration for any future study on this subject since it is a key feature of the Instagram platform. Another complication I noticed while conduction the analysis was if the user would have posted differently if they were aware how public the material they post really is. Therefore it would be interesting to get access and analyse profile that are hidden and needs approval from the user. Furthermore it would be interesting to investigate newer popular social media platforms amongst young adults, as it is an ever-evolving area.
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10. Appendices and Foot/Endnotes

Appendix 1. Table 1 – Filtered reality

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Male users</th>
<th>Female users</th>
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<td>Filtered selfie</td>
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<td>5</td>
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Appendix 2. Instagram comments (Sarah)

Bra jobbat!

Instagram comments (Anna)

Snygg!😊

du gumman!😢@felixhjorthanseon