

CASANOVA'S OF THE VIRTUAL WORLD HOW BOYS PRESENT THEMSELVES ON DATING WEBSITES¹

Abstract

As the identity of the young is largely shaped through the feedback they receive from their peers, the impression-management has become an essential part in the lives of the youth, both in the real world and also in the virtual worlds of the Internet.

The aim of the paper is to analyse how young men present themselves in the photographs of dating websites in the Baltic States. Dating websites of Rate (Estonia), Face (Latvia) and Point (Lithuania) are known as portals where people can post a short description of themselves and photos, so that other portal users can give points and rate what they see. The purpose of my study was to analyse how the boys on these websites formulate their masculine identities in order to appeal to potential partners.

Content analysis involving elements of visual analysis methods developed by Goffman (1979), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), Umiker-Sebeok (1996), Kang (1997), and Bell (2001), was carried out to analyse the photos of girls who appeared in the "TOP 100 of the most remarkable men" of Rate, Face and Point, in a period of six months. Altogether 117 men from Rate, 100 from Face and 113 from Point were analysed to find out how the boys market themselves on dating websites.

The results of the analysis suggest that the photos of the most remarkable boys play with two contradictory types of masculinity.

Keywords: *gender identity, masculinity, visual analysis, adolescence, communities in the new media*

The aim of this article is to introduce the reader to the everyday worlds of Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian twenty-first century Casanovas. These young men do not need to waste their energy dancing in ballrooms or serenading under the balconies; however they know exactly how to win the hearts of women – that is, through the Internet.

The article will discuss what kind of patterns are chosen for creating virtual gender identities among the most remarkable men in the dating websites of Rate (www.rate.ee), Face (www.face.lv) and Point (www.point.lt). These websites have become daily meeting places for thousands of youngsters in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania who are in search of new friends, acquaintances, kindred spirits or even life partners.

At first I shall discuss upon the role computer mediated communication may have to the identity building. Then I shall give a short introduction to the dating websites of Rate, Face and Point. After introducing the method and data of my study, I will concentrate on the ways the most remarkable boys on these afore-mentioned websites construct their gender identities.

¹ The preparation of this article was supported by the research grant No.ETF6968, financed by the Estonian Science Foundation.

Creating virtual impressions

Computer mediated communication has enlivened the social interaction of thousands of people. Thousands of Internet users can be found communicating in chat rooms, chatting in MSN, commenting in forums, or surfing on dating websites in order to make some new friends, enliven their love life or just pass their time. All those people who are socializing via Internet are just as anxious to create favorable impressions of themselves as the ones that are meeting face-to-face. According to Goffman (1959) impressions are formed through interpreting two kinds of “sign activity”: the expression given and the expression given off. The former of which is expressed during verbal communication, the latter is expressed through clothing, posture, bodily gestures, size, age, racial characteristics, appearance, i.e. ones looks in general. In order to find out what kind of qualities and features are thought to be essential by the potential partner a person may have to “perform” several acts before receiving the approval they were in search of.

According to Sherry Turkle (1995) the Internet has become „a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterizes postmodern life” (Turkle 1995, 180). Furthermore, in the new media environments people „may easily switch from the „real” to the chosen „ought” identity” (Petkova 2005, 6). Nevertheless, even if one is allowed to adopt whatever identity one chooses in virtual environments, studies have shown that men and women still tend to offer attributes thought to be sought by the opposite sex (Albright 2001; Schmidt & Buss 1996). In order to know what kind of qualities and features are desirable and accepted by the society, Danah Boyd suggests that „an individual must be constantly aware of the environmental feedback that they are receiving and adjust accordingly” (Boyd 2001, 110)

According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, people who are uncertain about their abilities and opinions tend to compare and evaluate themselves by making comparisons to similar others. Young people, who often feel the need to meet societal expectations, therefore unconsciously engage in social comparisons. Furthermore, studies have shown (cf. Brown & Gilligan, 1992) that for youth, the opinions of friends are immensely important as „the collective consciousness of peer codes is often the determinant of self-esteem” (Merskin 2006, 54).

Nowadays it is quite easy to find out what kinds of qualities are needed in order to become popular and remarkable in the eyes of the peers. For example, one just has to take one look around the different popularity charts in the websites of Rate, Face and Point to see what kind boys are the most remarkable in the eyes of the peers.

Communication and dating websites

Identically formed communication and dating websites of Rate, Face and Point were all built by the same person, Estonian IT- student Andrei Korobeinik. He wanted to create a website where people could post photos of themselves in order to receive comments and points from other users. All of his three projects have been immensely successful - Rate (www.rate.ee) with its 340,017 users is the most popular website in Estonia, Face (www.face.lv) is one of the biggest sites in Latvian Internet with more than 111,970 users and there are also more than 43,000 users of Point (www.point.lt) in Lithuania.

All of these numbers are extremely large for small countries like the Baltic States and give us a reason to believe that these websites have become a phenomenon of a kind. However, the incredible popularity of these websites, especially among the young, is in fact based on a simple and well-known truth about human nature – most of the users of the sites are driven by „a need to communicate, a need to be exposed (social feedback), also to make new acquaintances and to actualize themselves and to have the clear picture of the surrounding“(www.rate.ee). Furthermore, one of the main reasons why Rate, Face and Point have become so popular among the young lies in the fact that these portals create an opportunity to receive social feedback. Am I sexy and hot enough? Am I trendy and fashionable compared to the others? Does this hairdo look good on me? Do the chicks like my new nice-guy image? Comments by other website users give a perfect opportunity to find answers for all of the questions that are constantly on the minds of the youth. Furthermore, belonging to the different popularity TOP` s that are formed on these pages provides the young with an opportunity to collect social capital that is useful not just in the virtual world but also “convertible” in the “real” life.

Method and data

The study at hand is focused on the “TOP 100 of the most remarkable men” in Rate, Face and Point. This TOP is formed of young men who other website users believe to be the most

fascinating and cool, not to mention handsome, men on the site. In order to become part of the TOP 100 one has to be included in the so called “attention list” by other website users. Every user can form ones own “attention list”, i.e. one can mark the names one wants to keep track on constantly in order to look at new photos or receive all the other information about the personalities of their favorites.

The study is based on the photos of men who appeared in the “TOP 100 of the most remarkable men” of Rate, Face and Point, over a period of six months. From August 2005-February 2006 all in all 144 male users of Rate, 140 from Face and 152 from Point had a chance to belong in the “TOP 100 of the most remarkable men”. Nevertheless, not all of the young men who appeared in the TOP 100 could be analysed, as some of them had taken down all of their photos and others had removed their profile completely from the database. Therefore, altogether 117 men from Rate, 100 from Face and 113 from Point were analysed to find out how the boys market themselves on dating websites.

Content analysis involving elements of visual analysis methods developed by Goffman (1979), Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), Umiker-Sebeok (1996), Kang (1997), and Bell (2001), was carried out to analyse the most recently added photo of the boys in the TOP 100. The method of “reading images” that was used for the analysis was developed from social semiotic theory and makes explicit the ways people produce and communicate meaning through the spatial configurations of visual elements in the western societies. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) meaning is encoded in the structures of images: the form of representation; the presentation of people, objects and landscape; the composition; and its modality and medium.

The aim of the analysis was to find out how is gender identity constructed on the photos and what ways do the youngsters use in order to market themselves on dating website.

The main coding categories that will be further discussed in the paper were conceptually defined as follows:

- Social Distance. A distance from where the photo is taken. (intimate, close personal, close social, far personal, far social, public)
- Location. The setting from where the photo is taken – domestic environment (apartment, bedroom, kitchen, bathroom etc.); public space (nightclub, office, school, department store, etc); nature (woods, near a lake/sea/river; in the

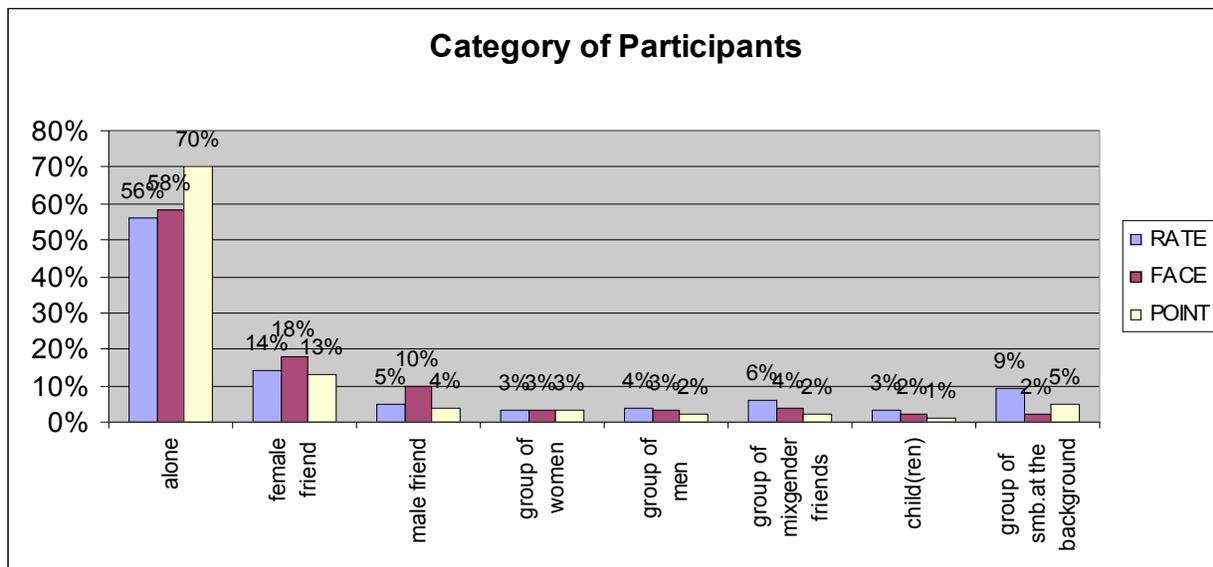
park/garden, etc.); or in the city (on the street; near a (famous) building, etc.), decontextualised (not visible where the photo is taken).

- Participants. The category includes the accompanying persons on the photo (alone, same sex friend(s); a friend(s) of the opposite sex; group of mixgender friends, child(ren); group of people at the background) as well as the animate and inanimate objects visible on the photo.
- Activities. An activity the person is engaged in doing while being photographed (“posing”, “entertaining”, “romance”, “doing sports”, “everyday activities”)

In the following paragraphs I will introduce some of the main findings of my study.

Category of Participants

The majority of men who belonged to the TOP 100 posed alone in the photographs. There were 66 (56%) men posing alone in Rate, 58 (58%) in Face and 79 (70%) in Point (Graph 1).



Graph 1: Category of Participants

Appearing alone on the photos can be seen as an adequate choice for posing on a dating website. Researchers (Schmitt and Buss 1996) have found that sending signals of sexual availability is especially effective in case of women in search of short term relationships. By creating an image

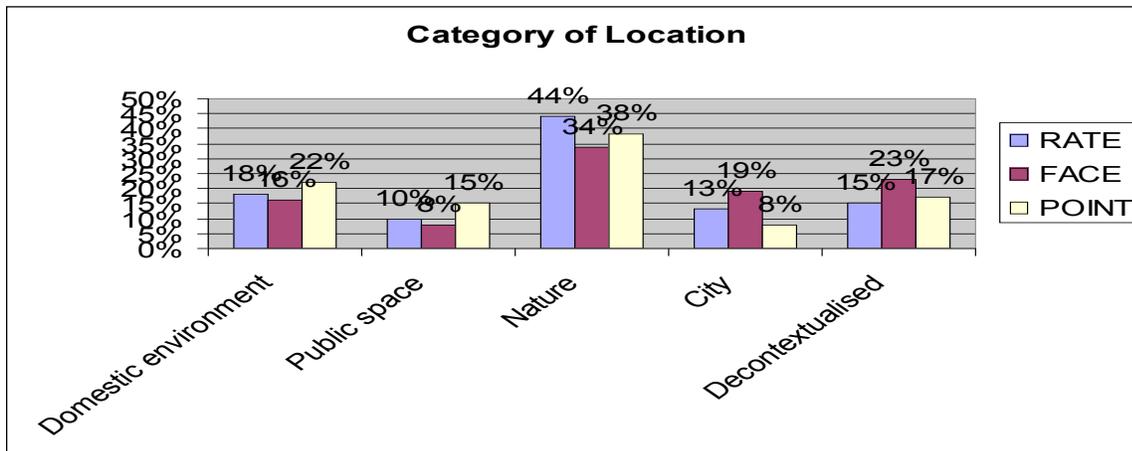
of oneself as someone who is still available, still out there looking for the special someone, the teenagers have, so to say, found an (un)conscious way of widening their horizon of possibilities.

Posing together with one's partner is the second highest way of appearing in the photos. On the one hand, this way of posing may work both as a stop-sign for some users, but on the other hand it may also act as a sign of "sexual exclusivity or fidelity" that may become effective in the long run (Schmitt and Buss 1996, 16). Studies (cf. Mazzarella 1996, 2006) have shown that partly thanks to the media image received from the girl fan magazines and other popular press, young girls tend to be drawn to "'safe" romantic heroes – the kind of boys one could bring home to meet mom and dad" (Mazzarella 2005, 154). The findings of Urbanik and Kilman (2003) also support this view while concluding that women are beginning to turn their back on "bad boys" and are more and more focused on finding "Mr. nice guy" - someone who is kind, considerate and sensitive all at the same time. Some of the most remarkable men in Rate, Face and Point have already turned to the "nice guy" image in order to find their way to the hearts of women users. There were 16 (14%) guys in Rate, 18 (18%) in Face and 15 (13%) in Point who were found hugging their female friends, holding their girlfriends tenderly in their arms or kissing them softly on the lips.

A smaller number of young men have found even a smoother way of demonstrating their reliability and sensitivity. All in all there were 6 (2%) men from Rate, Face and Point posing with small babies in their hands.

Category of Location

On all three websites, a large proportion of young men who appeared in the TOP 100 used more public settings for posing (Graph 2).



Graph 2: Category of Location

All in all, 67% of the photos of Rate, 70% for Point and 65% for Face depict boys posing either in the wilderness, somewhere in the city or in some other public environment like in an office, in a classroom, or a café. The finding corresponds to the results of a number of studies (e.g. Vigorito & Curry 1998) made of portrayals of men in the mass media, that conclude that “typically, men are depicted as autonomous; pictured outdoors or in business settings; and are less likely to be at home” (Vigorito & Curry 1998, 4).

The most popular location for posing in all of the cases was somewhere in the wilderness – in the woods, near a lake/sea/river, on the beach, in the mountains. In case of Rate 44% of the photos were taken in the nature, in case of Face and Point the percentages were a bit smaller 34% and 38% respectively. On the one hand, these photos taken in the wilderness illustrate a typical man – someone who is in charge of his own destiny and has power enough to change it. On the other hand there were a number of photos of boys posing while gazing dreamily into the horizon or smiling to the camera with a breathtakingly beautiful sunset on the background. Therefore, it could be said that viewing these photos of men who have chosen to pose in natural surroundings give a reason to believe that “we are seeing an emerging wave of men who scoff at traditional male boundaries, and do what they want-regardless of whether these things could be considered unmanly” (Sangeeta, Nov 16th 2003). The photos of this new type of a guy, a metrosexual man, are therefore taken so as to show him as “sensitive and romantic” the qualities of which make him irresistible to the opposite sex (Hackbarth, Nov 17th 2003).

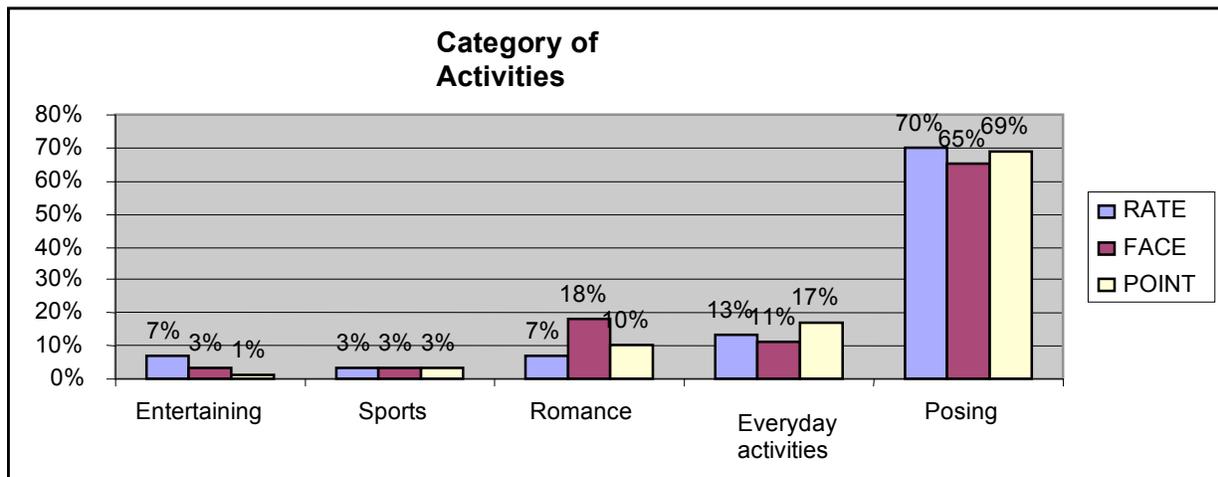
Photos taken in the domestic environment were not that popular among the teenaged boys, only 25 (22%) young men from Point, 21 (18%) from Rate and 16 (16%) from Face decided to pose in a private sphere. Still, the cosiness of their homes can really be felt in the

photos as these boys seem to not mind if you take a look inside of their living room, bedroom, kitchen, or even bathroom, while they are taking a shower.

However, not all of the young men who appeared in the “TOP 100 of the most remarkable men” in Rate, Face and Point can live without the age-old need to show off whenever some women are around. In case of the virtual world, this is always a possibility, and therefore a small number of guys from the websites had decided to pose somewhere in the city, beside a trendy limousine, to be more exact. The percentages were 13% for Rate, 19% for Face and 7% for Point.

Category of Activities

For my content analysis different activities were grouped under the headings “posing”, “entertaining”, “sports”, “romance”, and “everyday activities” (Graph 3). Most of the boys in the TOP had thought that they need not do anything special other than look good; therefore they simply posed for the photos.



Graph 3: The Category of Activities

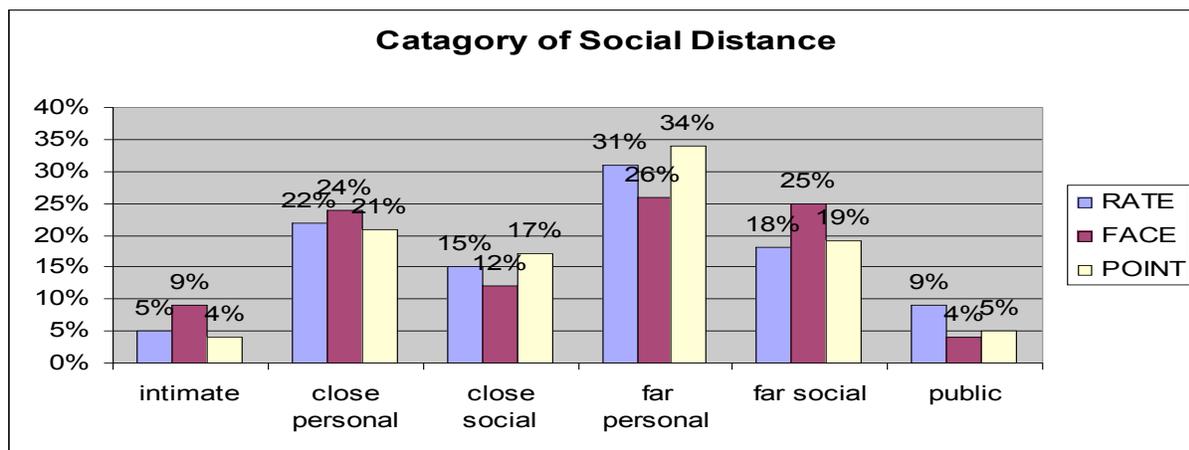
The coding showed that the most popular activities, other than “posing” belonged either in the “everyday doings” or “romance” section. In the “everyday activities” photos one could see boys eating lunch, or drinking alcohol, talking on the phone, taking pictures or watching TV. The “romance” activities, which were most popular among the Latvian men, included, for example, hugging and kissing with a female friend. However, there was a remarkable lack of photos where boys were engaged in a sporting activity. In fact

there were only 9 (3%) photos out of 330 that were taken while sporting. It seems that boys, are more willing to exhibit their romantic side to the whole (virtual) world than to be seen doing sports.

Category of Social Distance

According to Edward Hall (1966) people carry a set of invisible boundaries beyond which we allow only certain kinds of people to come (referred to in Kress and van Leeuwen 1996,130).

In case Rate, Face and Point the most popular distances for taking a photo were the far personal distance and the close personal distance (Graph 4).



Graph 4: *Category fo Social Distance*

All in all 34% of the photos of Face, 31% of Rate and 26% of Point depicted a young man posing from the waist up. Based on the theory of Hall (1966, 110-120) „„far personal distance” is the distance that `extends from a point that is just outside easy touching distance by one person to a point where two people can touch fingers if they both extend their arms`, the distance at which `subjects of personal interests and involvements are discussed`” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 131).

In their study Costa & Bitti (2000) observed that photos in which a whole figure of the person is shown are evaluated more negatively than the ones taken from close proximity. A number of studies (e.g. Levesque & Lowe 1999; Price-Rankin 2001) associate higher facial prominence with men. This finding was also confirmed in case of the three websites- there were 25 (22%) of photos from Rate, 24 (24%) of Face and 24 (21%) from Point taken at a close

personal distance so as that both the head and the shoulders of the person could be seen. Furthermore, there were also 6 photos (5%) in Rate, 9 (9%) in Face and 5 (4%) in Point in which only a face or a head of the person was visible. Previous studies have associated greater face-ism with “a higher evaluation of certain traits such as intelligence, ambition, and dominance” (Archer et. al 1983 referred to by Costa & Bitti 2000, 300).

Just as the „mainstream popular culture depicts male bodies in idealised and eroticised fashions, coded in ways that give permission of them to be looked at and desired” (Gill, Henwood & McLean 2005, 5) the results of the pilot-coding also show a growing trend of objectification of men` s bodies. In all three websites, but especially in case of Rate, a number of “images of sexualized men”, where “an attractive muscular man is put on display” could be found (Rohlinger 2002, 1). The images of these muscular men also confirm the idea of Gill et.al (2005) that for the 21 century men „body has become a source of symbolic capital, less because of what the body is able to do then how it looks” (Gill et.al 2005, 5).

Conclusion

According to Goffman (1959/1990), individuals tend to accentuate and suppress certain aspects of the self depending on the context of the situation. Whenever others are present, people tend to accentuate these aspects of the self that typically correspond to norms and ideals of the group the person belongs to, or wishes to belong to.

In case of Rate, Face and Point it is important to note that these young men in the TOP 100 are selected to be part of this elite circle by other website users. The users of these sites have unanimously chosen them to represent the “ideal” who may serve as role models for others. They could be considered trend-setters on the site because the patterns they have used for constructing their virtual identities could be regarded as a safe and sound way for earning approval and recognition from their peers.

Vigorito & Curry (1998) found in their study of popular magazines that the sex of the target audience influences the gender portrayals and creates contrary expectations among the readers. They found that while male readers are hoping the portrayals of men to confirm the traditional identities of hegemonic masculinity, women, on the contrary, have “more nurturing visions of men in their minds” (Vigorito & Curry 1998, 26). It seems that in case of Rate, Face and Point both of the genders should feel satisfied – there are Macho Men and Hippies, Mr. Nice

Guys and Playboys among the Casanovas in the virtual worlds. Nevertheless, it seems that they still manage to get all the women in real life.

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