Self-presentation and Impression Formation through Photographs in an LGBT Online Dating Community

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Abstract

This netnographic and autoethnographic study examines self-presentation and impression formation through photographs presented on a gay online dating community, Qruiser. The theoretical framework of Goffman’s performance of self and Asch’s formation of impression was developed based on semiotic signifiers and signified. The study was carried out through participant observation of 200 gay daters’ photographs, online interviews, group discussions and narratives of the author’s personal experience. Observation showed that gay daters primarily presented six categories of photographs: self-portrait, daily pictures, travel pictures, sexually explicit pictures, pictures of objects, and black and white pictures. The daters were asked to justify their photographs in self-presentations, and the responses showed that the signs in the photographs could be both intentional and unintentional. Online interviews and group discussion participants suggested that there were distinctions of central and peripheral signifiers in impression formation. Furthermore, participants felt that misunderstanding of impressions resulting from dating photographs was unimportant, due to the compensation of textual presentation and messages.

Keywords: Photograph, Self-presentation, Impression Formation, Misunderstanding, online dating, Qruiser.com
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Photography is everywhere. It would be extremely difficult to get through a day without seeing a photograph. (...) Yet despite its ubiquity, photography remains a mysterious and fascinating medium, hard to pin down (Bull 2010, 88).

1. Introduction

1.1 Making a First Impression in Online Dating

When two strangers meet face-to-face, they enter an initial stage of interpersonal interactions in which they make first impressions on each other. During this initial stage, self-presentation and impression formation are two essential processes (Goffman 1959; C. R. Berger and Calabrese 1975). Such encounters among strangers not only occur in the physical reality, but also in an online sphere, such as online dating sites. Online dating, as a form of social network service, provides a contemporary alternative to finding friends, sexual and romantic partners. In the United States, approximately 13% of the population have tried online dating (U. S. Census Bureau 2014; Statistic Brain 2014). In this online sphere, self-presentation and impression formation are essential processes in interpersonal interactions.

Self-presentation is embodied as a profile when an individual engages in online dating. A profile is an essential component for those who anticipate further interaction (Utz 2010; Ellison, Hancock, and Toma 2012). An online dating profile usually includes several elements: profile picture, personal facts (gender, age, height, ethnicity, etc.), self-description (a short text presenting the person, and various other information), and a photo album. Photo albums enable the individual to upload and present more photographs than just a profile picture. These various elements are remedies for the lack of physical presence in an online dating site. In addition, online self-presentation is a selective process because of the slowed temporal dynamics of computer-mediated communication (CMC), and the editable nature of text and photographs in CMC (Walther 1992; Hancock and Toma 2009). Following is some example advice for being selective in self-presentation; this information resulted from searching the index term “online dating pictures” on the Internet.

Try to talk about what you like, not what you're like. Don't call yourself any of the following: witty, ambitious, down-to-earth, or humble. Mention a few TV shows, movies, bands, and books you enjoy (GQ 2013).

Many of the results offered advice as to how daters could choose the “perfect” picture for their online dating profiles, what types of photographs they should avoid, what information they should include in the textual presentation, and so on. Being selective in an online self-presentation means that an online dater, the individual who uses online dating services, has more control over his or her first impression than he or she would have in a face-to-face encounter.

Impression formation is a process of gathering and integrating information of an individual so as to form a general understanding of the individual. It is estimated that for those who can see, more than 80% of information is received through the eyes (A. A. Berger 2008, 1). Berger (2008) suggests that an individual obtains a large amount of information about others on the basis of visual perception. In online dating, the visual aspects include textual presentations and photographs, and impressions of other daters are formed based on these features. A study shows that whereas text is used to judge the likability of the other dater, a photograph is the stronger predictor of first impression of attractiveness and the online dater’s decision to initiate contact with the other dater (Taylor et al. 2010). In other words, a photograph has an essential role in online dating, because it is one key factor that determines whether there will be an interaction between the daters. At the same time, the importance of photographs in the initial contact highlights the irreplaceable role of the picture in impression formation as well as self-presentation in online dating.

1.2 Photographs in Self-presentation and Impression Formation

An invisible communication exists between self-presentation and impression formation. The “object” of this communication is discursive information, such as an online dater’s identity, personality, interests, and so on, in the form of photographs. An empirical study has shown that the contents of a profile, profile pictures of the owner and the owner’s friends (also included in the owner’s profile that was studied), can alter people’s impressions about the personality of the profile owner (Utz 2010). In the study, two profiles were arranged intentionally according to two specific personalities, extraversion and introversion. In the extravert profile, the pictures of the owner and the owner’s friends showed lively facial
expressions and were mostly taken in a party context. In the introvert profile, the owner and the owner’s friends were shown alone, distanced, and in a quiet way (such as reading a book) in the pictures. The communication of the messages “extraversion” and “introversion” started from the researcher’s arrangement of profile and photographs, and then ended when the participants replied with their impressions.

The importance of the arrangement is twofold. First, this process of intentional arrangement is an embodiment of selective self-presentation, as the researcher controlled what was shown. Secondly, the process of intentional arrangement can be better understood using Stuart Hall’s (1980) terminology of encoding, which is a process of message construction framed by meanings and ideas. Therefore, the intentional arrangement constructed messages of extraversion and introversion through manipulation of photographs based on Utz’s ideas and knowledge of the terms.

In semiotics the manipulation of the photographs is actually a manipulation of signifiers, the form in which a concept is embodied (Barthes 1967), and this constitutes the content in the photographs. The messages of extraversion and introversion are signifieds, the concept for which an object stands (Saussure 1966). The combination of both signifiers and signifieds is called a sign (Ibid.).

In addition to the influence of photographs on impression of personality, in Utz’s study, the results indicated that not all the participants perceived the intended personality for which the profile was edited. Nonetheless, Utz did not discuss several questions in the study. First, why would a certain picture suggest extraversion or introversion in self-presentation? In other words, which were the signifiers in the picture that were supposed to give an impression of extraversion or introversion? Second, how did some participants form the intended impression from the picture? From which signifiers in the picture did they get the implied personality? Third, why did some participants not perceive the profile in the same way as it was intended? Therefore, it is questionable how semiotics was incorporated into the processes of choosing photographs for self-presentation and forming an impression. In addition, the fact that participants failed to perceive the intended personality indicates a misunderstanding in the invisible dialogue between self-presentation and impression formation through photographs, but the reason for that remains unclear. These several questions lead to the aim of this research study.
1.3 Research Purpose

In light of the previously discussed findings indicating that photographs are essential in self-presentation and impression formation in online dating, the purpose of this current study should be illuminated. Recent studies have indicated that self-presentation and impression formation are related to signifiers in photographs. Being successful in extending the notion of selective self-presentation from textual context to profile photographs, Hancock and Toma’s (2009) study indicates that online daters, who are selective, do consider signifiers during the process of self-presentation through photographs. Another scholar, Utz, shows that intentionally arranged profile pictures of the owner and owner’s friends jointly influence impressions (Utz 2010). However, there is one significant limitation with these studies: they have failed to discuss the underlying connection of signs with self-presentation and impression formation. That is, they only discuss self-presentation and impression formation on a macro-level, the photograph itself, but not on a micro-level, the sign.

Consequently, the purpose of this study is to examine and understand online daters’ practices of self-presentation and impression formation through photographs, and their incorporation of semiotic signs into the practices. This will be accomplished by focusing on gay online daters in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) online dating community, Qruiser. Different from previous research, this study will provide a gay online dater’s perspective on using photographs to present oneself and forming impressions of other daters. Through an analysis of their accounts, one can gain a deeper insight into the application of semiotic sign in self-presentation and impression formation. A deeper discussion of the choice of the focus on gay online daters will be introduced in the next chapter. Furthermore, through the study of the intersection of self-presentation and impression formation, one can clarify the mechanism of underlying misunderstandings in dating photographs.

1.4 Research Questions

Taking previous findings and research purpose into consideration, three main research questions are proposed for this study.

1. How do gay online daters incorporate semiotic signs in their choices of photographs?
2. How do gay online daters obtain information about profile owners from dating photographs?
3. How does a misunderstanding of impression arise from self-presentation and impression formation from dating photographs?

The answers to the above questions would ideally provide not only a deeper understanding of the role of semiotic signs in self-presentation and impression formation, but also a new insight into the misunderstanding that might arise from dating photographs.

In addition to the above main questions, an introductory question is proposed: From a semiotic point of view, what are the main categories of photographs that gay online daters show in their profiles? The categories will not only provide an overview of the photographs that are used for the gay online daters’ presentations of selves, but also partially underlay the author’s choice of photographs on which the participants’ impressions are based. This leads to a description of the operational process of this research study.

1.5 Overview of the Study

In consideration of the research purpose and research questions, this study is designed as a combination of netnography, a qualitative study using ethnographic research online (Kozinets 2010), and authoethnography, a study that “focuses on self as a study subject” (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2012, 18). In order to find the answers to the research questions, this thesis is based on a mixed method of participant observation, online interviews, group discussion, and personal experience in the online dating community, Qruiser.

On the one hand, in light of netnography, participant observation involves the author’s observation of participants’ photographs in self-presentation so as to discover the underlying patterns in the photographs. Online interviews and group discussion are conducted with gay online daters from Qruiser to discuss their experience in choosing photographs for self-presentation, and their impression of the author of this study, based on the chosen photographs that will be presented in the results chapter.

On the other hand, participant observation in netnography is also a personal experience of forming impressions of the participants through their dating photographs for the autoethnographic study. Furthermore, the autoethnographic study is also based on the author’s experience in choosing photographs for a profile in the online dating community.
All in all, it is this complex structure of interrelated methods that support the empirical work of the study. A more in-depth discussion on the characteristics of netnography and autoethnography, data collection, and ethical issues in conducting this research are included in the methodology chapter.

1.6 Significance of the Research

The current study examines online daters’ interpretations of photographs in self-presentation and impression formation, and their incorporation of semiotic signs in the processes. It has great potential for expanding the understanding of gay online daters’ use of photographs.

Firstly, online dating has gained attention and popularity from the public as well as from scholars (Valkenburg and Peter 2007). Regarding gay online dating, many researchers have focused on various topics, which will be introduced in the following chapter. However, limited research has been conducted, particularly in examining dating photographs in the interpersonal processes of self-presentation and impression formation. Therefore, with the research purpose of focusing on dating photographs, the study intends to expand the existing academic discussion regarding gay people’s use of the Internet in interacting with other like-minded people.

Secondly, as mentioned in previous sections, the preceding research neglected the underlying connection of semiotic signs in photographs with the mechanism of self-presentation and impression formation. Hence, through the analysis of the perspective of gay online daters as insiders, this study is able to introduce a deeper understanding of the incorporation of semiotic signs in light of online dating.

Finally, since online dating increasingly gains attention as an alternative way of meeting people, this study can broaden the understanding of interpersonal activities in online dating. Specifically, it can contribute a deeper insight for future studies, or even for online daters who happen to read this thesis, in critically examining dating photographs in the processes of presenting and acquiring personal information.

1.7 Following Chapters

The discussion is provided through five further chapters. The next chapter will first provide background on the choice of gay men and their culture of online dating, and the LGBT
community Qruiser, presenting the operation and functionality of Qruiser as a social networking site (SNS). A firm understanding of Qruiser will aid the reader in better understanding the discussion on self-presentation and impression formation in this study. The third chapter presents an in-depth discussion on previous studies and theoretical framework on which the present study is based. After a discussion on self-presentation and impression formation the author offers a critical discussion on semiotics theory in which the concepts of signifier and signified, denotation and connotation, and encoding and decoding will be addressed. In the fourth chapter, the author encloses a description of the methodology that this qualitative study enforces, as well as potential ethical issues that might be raised by this research. The fifth chapter begins with a presentation of collected data and analysis in which the author discusses the gay online daters’ choice of photographs in self-presentation and impression, and their incorporation of semiotic signs. The final chapter will conclude the research and discuss the underlying limitations in this study, so as to offer advice for future studies.
2. Background Information

2.1 Gay men

Among the articles mentioned in the previous chapter, most targeted how heterosexual online daters could enhance their profile photographs. Nevertheless, not only heterosexual people are participating in online dating, but also those who identify themselves as homosexual. There are two main reasons why special attention is paid to gay online daters in the current study: personal and academic.

The personal reasons that the author selected gay men for this study is because of his personal ties to this group. Being born and raised in Hong Kong, China where homosexual people cannot freely express their sexual orientation in public, I can state from experience that bringing my sexuality online has had an undeniable influence on the exploration and acceptance of my sexual orientation. Online dating services offer gay people, including me, a relatively safe and discreet way to congregate, fashion friendships, affirm sexual identity, and meet other LGBT members (Campbell 2004, 53; Brown, Maycock, and Burns 2005). One does not necessarily need to reveal his physical identity in order to meet other people in the online sphere. I can present myself freely as a homosexual person to people I do not know, without concern to how they might judge me as in offline life. However, the Internet might not be as safe for some gay people as it is for me, since there are actual cases where teenagers exposed their sexuality online and committed suicide because of societal oppression, such as receiving hate comments and being bullied in school (for example, Jamey Rodemeyer (MailOnline 2011)). Nevertheless, for gay people who face a relatively small market of potential partners compared to heterosexual people, online dating has developed and become a dominant method of locating other users with the same sexual orientation.

Gay men are chosen not only because of author’s personal interest and connection to them, but also because it is known that gay people have a different focus in self-presentation under the context of online dating (Gonzales and Meyers 1993; Kaufman and Chin Phua 2003). It has been shown that gay men are not completely consistent with heterosexual men in terms of content of self-presentation in personal ads; gay men tend to emphasise physical characteristics, and are more likely to be sexually explicit (Gonzales and Meyers 1993). In addition, age preferences are also more expected to appear in gay men’s personal ads than in
those of straight men (Kaufman and Chin Phua 2003). These are some of the cues upon which profile viewers would develop their impressions, and sometimes these are visualised as signifiers in self-presenting photographs (such as pictures that contain nude torsos). In short, self-presentation in an online sphere could be an exploration of sexual identity (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield 2006; Laukkanen 2007), and it is argued that within the field of communication, it would be one-sided to narrowly focus on heterosexual daters to understand representation of the self (Deaux and Hanna 1984, 364–5; Gonzales and Meyers 1993, 132). Therefore, in this study gay online daters are approached in order to understand self-presentation and impression formation through dating photographs.

2.2 Gay Online Dating

It would be naïve to study self-presentation and impression formation in a gay online dating community without any understanding of the broader cultural dimension that has helped shape the use of photographs in this area. The concept of culture has been widely discussed; however, it does not have a unique definition that is used universally by scholars. Culture, as Edward B. Tylor (1871, 1) explained, is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Certainly, it is not only men who acquire such discursive complexities, but also women. Culture is a set of patterns that is experienced by individuals as a norm for acting, feeling and being (E. T. Hall 1959; Smith-Maddox 1998). It is formed by the interaction between social actors, behaviours of the population, and their environment (Slaughter-Defoe 1993).

The culture of gay online dating was not formed abruptly. It was shaped under the conventional idea of heterosexuality that is embedded in the social norm, which once considered (or still in some cultures) that homosexuality was (is) an illness. For instance, being openly non-heterosexual could be regarded as illegal in many countries, and in countries like Sudan and Saudi Arabia, having a same-sex relationship could even cause the accused to face a death penalty (Rodgers et al. 2014). In Russia, the government has passed a law banning gay propaganda, imposing fines for providing information about homosexuality to people under 18 (BBC.co 2013). This norm, together with the notion that a male is supposed to pair up with a female, have suppressed gay people from freely expressing their
“abnormal” sexuality. It has led them to favour the Internet where it is a (somewhat) safer space for exploration of sexual identity.

In the pre-digital age, under the conventional heterosexual norm, homosexual activities were limited to places such as gay bars and parks (Dank 1971). When the Internet was introduced, homosexuals were among the first to adapt to it (Gross 2007). Queer youths who usually feel physically and emotionally secluded, were early to appreciate the potential use of the Internet for friendship and group formation that is “valuable for members of self-identified minorities who are scattered and often besieged in their home surroundings”; the Internet provides them a space to explore their sexual orientation and seek for support from other likeminded people (Gross 2007, ix). Whereas the Internet provides gay men an online sphere to explore their sexual identity, online dating communities offer them platforms to meet likeminded people.

Gay men have used the Internet in various aspects, such as racial passing, in which gay Internet users from one racial group identify themselves as another race on the Internet thanks to the possibility of anonymity (Gosine 2007). Additionally the Internet may be used for sexual purposes, providing a platform for some gay men to seek a sexual encounter with another gay men (Parsons et al. 2007; Nodin, Carballo-Diéguez, and Leal 2013). The Internet can be used for political issues, such as racism, where gay men of certain races and characteristics are marginalised and considered as less desirable than others (Han 2008; J. Smith 2012). Although the larger gay community has been marginalised by society, there is also internal marginalisation among the community. That is partly caused by internal stereotyping, for example gay Asian men are often viewed as feminine, passive, and xenophilic, i.e., they would take any available foreigner (Han 2007; Han 2008). Such internal marginalisation leads to dating behaviour of stating racial preference in self-presentation in online dating (Phua and Kaufman 2003).

Collectively, the social norm of heterosexuality, internal marginalisation, and use of the Internet help to shape and sustain the culture in which some gay men have integrated Internet activity, such as online dating, into their everyday lives.

Consequently, by focusing on the culture of gay online dating, this study can contribute a deeper understanding in regard to the mechanism of interpersonal impression management (or in other words, self-presentation) and formation through photographs between gay online daters, as well as the misunderstanding that dating photographs may trigger.
2.3 Qruiser.com

After a brief introduction to the culture in which the study has been developed, it is now important to introduce the target community in this research, Qruiser.com. It is subordinate to QX, which is the largest LGBT-media publisher in Scandinavia with QX Monthly (magazine), QX.se (a website for LGBT related news), Qruiser.com, and QX online GayMap (a guide for ongoing LGBT events in different countries and cities). As part of QX, Qruiser claims to be the Nordic region’s largest community for lesbian, gay, bi (bisexual), trans (transsexual), queer and those just a little gay in general (Qruiser.com 2014a). One of the primary functions of Qruiser is to provide an online platform for gay and queer users to look for penpals, friends, dates, relationship and sexual partners. Qruiser is a homophone for the word “cruiser”, which in the gay culture stands for homosexual men who engage in cruising. Different from the nonsexual sense, in light of gay culture, cruising is an activity in which gay men wander around in a locality, such as parks, which is well-known for gay men, so as to search for an anonymous, casual, and one-time sexual partners.

Qruiser is known as a “cyber park” among gay men in Sweden. To date (Feb 26, 2014), it has 106252 active members, 73% (77888) of whom are male; most of the active members (71%) are located in Sweden (Qruiser.com 2014b). Instead of walking around and checking out physical people, on Qruiser, one browses through a list of users and checks out a person through clicking onto his profile. In reality, that person would know that someone is interested if they had eye contact. However, on Qruiser every time a viewer clicks onto a profile, his footprint is automatically recorded by the system, so that the profile owner knows that a viewer looked at his profile and even the exact time when he were there.

In addition to textual presentation and dating photographs, Qruiser has many user-founded online clubs that users are allowed to choose and join. Once a user joins a club, this club will be optionally visible as a list in the user’s profile. As these clubs are based on various personal interests (sports, political views, sexual interests), joining these clubs often indicates that a user shares the same interests as the clubs, which makes the list of clubs in the user’s profile an indirect form of self-presentation. However, with the exception of the user’s name, most of the information in a profile on Qruiser is optional, which means that users are not obligated to write a presentation text, to show pictures of themselves, or to join a club. In
other words, on Qruiser, there are several kinds of profiles: profiles with plenty of text and pictures, and profiles with either only text or only pictures.

An online dating community offers users a digital platform to initiate social contact with other individuals in the same group. Communication of personal information among daters is primarily mediated in the online community by means of text-based and photo-based dating profiles and private messages, or in some cases, in the form of audio- and video-chats (for example, Speeddate.com). Instead of calling itself an online dating site, Qruiser is identified as a gay and queer online community. The reason is that Qruiser not only offers online dating services, but also provides a platform where people can communicate and take part in discussions in blogs, clubs and forums. Additionally, participating in general discussions is not necessarily accompanied by the goal of looking for someone. Given these functions, Qruiser becomes something more than just a dating site. However, in this research the author focuses only on the aspect of online dating, which includes profile settings and profile viewings in which photographs can also be involved. As the biggest LGBT online community in the Nordic region, Qruiser is more than suitable to be the target site of this research that studies the communication of impressions through photographs among gay users.
3. Previous Studies and Theoretical Approach

The communication of impressions can be discussed from two perspectives, the process of presenting oneself and the process of forming an impression of others. In the context of online dating, there is a constant interpersonal process of self-presentation and impression formation. Every time a photograph is uploaded or a textual description is amended by an online dater, it is a process of self-presentation. Every time one’s profile is viewed by others, an impression is made.

![Theoretical Framework Diagram]

*Figure 1. Theoretical Framework*

This chapter presents a theoretical discussion on self-presentation and impression formation, as well as related previous studies that are conducted in the CMC context. In addition, this chapter proposes an analytical framework, *semiotics*, which assists the author in analysing participants’ perspective so as to examine how semiotic signs are incorporated in the two practices. Additionally, this framework can assist in articulating the process of understanding visual cues. Before discussing different theories separately, Figure 1 shows the complex yet interrelated structure of the theories that are used in the study. In total there are three domains with self-presentation on the one side and impression formation on the other. Semiotics is located between the two, overlapping both sides, which shows that the theories of both self-presentation and impression formation would to some extent relate to semiotics.
“Social front” is a term Erving Goffman (1959) used when addressing presentation of self. He suggested that self-presentation is like an actor performing a role on stage, and a social front consists of settings and a personal front that could assist with the performance. If the play is for example, captured in a photograph, then the social front can be considered as a signifier in a semiotic aspect.

On the other side of semiotics is impression formation. When Soloman Asch (1946) discussed impression formation, he experimented by presenting several traits, and the participant formed an impression based on the list of traits. Egon Brunswik (1956) suggested that an observer makes inferences about the personality of other individuals through lenses such as their behaviour and features that they produce. In light of semiotics, both traits and lenses can be considered as signifiers, since they evoke meanings and enable the observer to associate those traits and lenses with their knowledge, allowing the observer to form an impression.

Finally, there are two messages and two coding processes that connect the theories. The messages represent Roland Barthes’ (Barthes 1977a) terminology of connotation, or a “message with code”. For those who present themselves, they would encode messages into a signifier or several signifiers in a photograph. On the other hand, those who form an impression would try to understand, or decode, the message that is implied in the photograph.

This figure provides an idea of how different theories are interrelated, which together firmly structure a theoretical framework. The framework could be potentially applied to the study of dating photographs and the incorporation of semiotic signs in self-presentation and impression formation.

3.1 Self-Presentation

3.1.1 “Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”

[…] the individual who presents himself before them [audiences]. He may wish them to think highly of him […] he may wish to ensure sufficient harmony so that the interaction can be sustained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize, or insult them (Goffman 1959, 15).

Self-presentation is a process of modifying personal behaviour to establish a certain impression on others (Jones and Pittman 1982), refining a particular image of oneself in the
mind of others (Baumeister 1982), or “showing oneself to a particular kind of person” (Schlenker and Weigold 1989; DePaulo 1992). In the discussion of self-presentation, one of the representative scholars is Erving Goffman with his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman (1959) defined self-presentation as a process of packaging and auditing the self in order to create a particular impression upon the audiences. Goffman described self-presentation in a dramaturgical manner, explaining the presentation of self within a metaphorical social setting as a performance in front of audiences. An individual coming into contact with others is referred as an actor standing in front of his audience; and the presentation of self the individual puts forth is an act of a play, a performance. The motivation for the performance is to impose the others or audiences with an impression that is consistent with the anticipated goal of the actor. The actor attempts to control or lead the impression that the audience will form of him by altering his “social front” (Ibid.).

A “social front” in Goffman’s terminology is “the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance”, which is a meaning carrier that helps define the situation (Goffman 1959, 32). Social front is a combination of both “settings” and “personal front”. Whereas “setting” is environmental, a “personal front” is individual.

On the one hand, there are settings, such as furniture and background items on the stage where the play is performed, so that the actor who would use a certain setting as part of his performance and cannot begin his act until he is in the appropriate place (Goffman 1959, 33). For example, a surgeon may be a general name for those who perform operations, but a dentist requires different equipment from a heart surgeon to perform his tasks. These settings assist the actor’s intent of sending out a particular message during the performance.

On the other hand, besides the stage settings that might assist the performance, Goffman (1959, 34; 36) suggested that there are personal fronts with which the audiences intimately identify the actor. A personal front consists of two parts: appearance and manner (Ibid.). Appearance includes, for example, sex, age, look, size, racial characteristics and so on. Such relatively permanent physical appearances are irrepressible and have an “immediate and important influence on the impressions perceivers form” (DePaulo 1992, 205). Manner involves behaviour such as facial expressions, body gestures, and the like. Appearance and manner are usually expected to be consistent with each other; however, they might, in fact, contradict each other (Goffman 1959). For example, an unknown 20-year-old man using
drugs might not be a newsworthy item; but the fact that Justin Bieber used drugs, which contradicts the public’s expectation of a positive image of a young, famous singer, causes it to be widely reported by the media.

The same social front may be employed to evoke similar expectations in different situations (Goffman 1959). In addition, a social front “tends to become institutionalised in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks” (Goffman 1959, 37). For instance, latex gloves can commonly be seen in hospitals, restaurants, and laboratories. However, latex gloves can be employed in a different situation, or performance, to illuminate a similar expression of cleanliness and hygienic maintenance. This social front has been institutionalised and may be expected to be consistent in spite of the different performance.

Goffman also pointed out the idealisation in presentation of self. He suggested, “A performance is ‘socialized’, moulded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (Goffman 1959, 44). Such expectations of the society could be cultural, i.e., situational norms or conventions that restrain the formulation of self-presentation intentions, which “constrain the kinds of self-presentation that are likely to be selected” (DePaulo 1992, 213). Goffman added that in such a “socialization process” there is a “tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways” (Goffman 1959, 44). If an actor himself is considered as a product, and he presents this product to others, he will tend to show the audiences the outcome that has been “finished, polished, and packaged”, and the audiences are led to judge based on the end product (Goffman 1959, 52). Such idealisation could be misleading, which would lead to the problem of misrepresentation.

3.1.2 Application and Development of Goffman’s Self-presentation in CMC

Previous empirical studies have investigated misrepresentation in self-presentation on SNS. One characteristic of Internet and online communities is anonymity (Kozinets 2010, 68), which largely enables an online dater or “actor”, if one is to apply Goffman’s terminology, to manipulate the information and social front that is performed for others or audiences. Because of this, several researchers have examined the accuracy of users’ online dating profiles with respect to their physical attributes: height, weight and age (Toma, Hancock, and Ellison 2008). They reported inaccurate statements of men in their height and women in their weight,
which contributes to the notion of self-presentation (or a virtual “play”) and that there is a gender difference in the focus of what actors tend to misrepresent in front of audiences.

The reason for inaccurately stating height and weight is the desire to approach the institutionalised ideal physical appearance. It is an idealisation in self-presentation. Goffman’s discussion on self-presentation is based on face-to-face encounters in which non-verbal cues that typically stimulate impressions are not necessarily available in CMC. However, thanks to modern technology, many mobile phones nowadays come with a camera that supplements the lack of visual cues in CMC. This makes it possible for scholars to examine the idealisation and misrepresentation of self-presentation through visual cues.

Photographs, which were once considered a record of “life as it is” (Dijck 2008, 58), can now be edited and altered through modern technology. For that reason, scholars have studied the use of facial images by online daters and how accurately those images are represented or how people “perform” their “physical selves” (Hancock and Toma 2009; Toma and Hancock 2010, 336). In “Putting Your Best Face Forward”, Hancock and Toma (2009) examined the accuracy of online dating photographs presented by 54 heterosexual daters, and showed inconsistencies in self-perception and other-perception in self-presentation. The research was conducted based on data collected from daters’ self-reported accuracy, independent judges’ perception of accuracy, and inconsistencies in the profile pictures identified by experienced coders. The authors approached the aim from different hypotheses. On the one hand, they considered that deception appears frequently in online dating photographs with the purpose of self-enhancement. On the other hand, the authors assumed that there was a gender difference in the accuracy of photographs in the context of online dating. The study shows that online daters tend to give higher ratings considering the accuracy of photographs than independent judges. In addition, the authors suggested that, compared with the photographs provided by male daters, the photographs of female daters are more likely to contain inconsistencies such as skin quality and hairstyle. Hancock and Toma show that Goffman’s idea of idealisation and misrepresentation in self-presentation in face-to-face encounters is proven and supported in the context of CMC where limited visual cues are provided. Even on SNS, online daters (actors) tend to edit the self so that they are socially desirable and create a favourable impression that would meet the expectations of society.

However, in the above study, Hancock and Toma focus only on the physical appearance of the online daters, but not on other elements in the photographs. Because of that, it was not
crucial for the study to adapt semiotic analysis on photographs to be able the study the accuracy of self-presentation through photographs. They pointed out this limitation:

*Profile photographs can include other information relevant to self-presentation, including props and settings that can highlight aspects of the self. [...] [A] photograph displaying the dater on a tropical beach might convey the impression of a person who loves travel to sunny locales. The present study did not consider aspects of the photograph beyond the physical* (Hancock and Toma 2009, 383).

As mentioned, Goffman (1959) suggested that on the front stage where the play is performed, “setting” as expressive equipment assists the actor in his performance. That is to say, when Goffman’s idea is to be used to understand photographs, other elements should be considered useful in self-presentation, such as the background. The idealisation and misrepresentation of an actor’s play that is sufficiently enhanced in CMC lead to a further discussion in **selective self-presentation**, a carefully controlled and orchestrated type of self-presentation:

*Among zero-history CMC participants particularly, one was not bound by the cues to personality others infer from physical appearance or vocalic attributes. They were better able to plan, and had increased opportunity to self-censor. With more time for message construction and less stress of ongoing interaction, users may have taken the opportunity for objective self-awareness, reflection, selection and transmission of preferable cues* (Walther 1992, 229).

Selective self-presentation is made possible by two critical features of CMC, reduced communication cues and potentially asynchronous communication (Walther 1996, 19). Whereas reduced communication cues are a mixture of both factors, the latter one is not always a factor for selective self-presentation, as some CMC is real-time interaction, such as video chat (Walther 1996). These two features allow actors to have more control over their play than they would in face-to-face encounters.

### 3.1.3 Summary

Goffman’s concept of self-presentation is based on face-to-face encounter while Walther’s amended selective self-presentation is based on Goffman’s study and developed on and enabled by CMC. Goffman’s dramaturgical theory explained in detail the mechanism of self-presentation in everyday encounters while Walther’s theory is developed around the features
of lack of communication cues and asynchronism in CMC. The combination would provide a firm framework in the discussion of self-presentation through photographs in online dating. When an actor puts on a performance, audiences are expected to take seriously the impression that is fostered in front of them (Goffman 1959, 28). This leads us from the perspective of an actor’s self-presentation to that of the audience’s impression formation.

3.2 Impression Formation

3.2.1 Personal Traits

_We look at a person and immediately a certain impression of his character forms itself in us. A glance, a few spoken words are sufficient to tell us a story about a highly complex matter_ (Asch 1946, 258).

*Impression formation* is the process of gathering and integrating information of an individual so as to form an impression of that individual. The information is discussed as *traits* in Asch’s (1946) study on forming impressions of personality. The embodiment of traits is defined as a pattern of behaviour, thought and emotion in trait theory (Kassin 2003). A trait does not serve as an isolated characteristic that produces a particular meaning and impression, but instead its content is “itself partly a function of the environment of the other characteristics (traits), of their mutual relations” (Asch 1946, 268). Every trait has its own meaning, but the meaning is not constant and independent; instead, it is influenced by other traits that are presented together. Asch further stated:

_The gaining of an impression is for them not a process of fixing each trait in isolation and noting its meaning. If they proceeded in this way the traits would remain abstract, lacking just the content and function which makes them living traits_ (Asch 1946, 285).

However, not all traits are equally important for the final impression, as there is a process of discrimination between central and peripheral traits. Central traits are traits that influence interpretation of peripheral traits (Asch 1946). That is to say, given two sets of characteristics each with one central trait and several peripheral traits, different impressions would be found if the two sets had the same peripheral traits but different central traits. This was proven in one of Asch’s studies conducted on two groups that were exposed to two lists of traits. Group A’s list included intelligent, skilful, industrious, warm, determined, practical, and cautious.
Group B’s traits included intelligent, skilful, industrious, cold, determined, practical, and cautious. With warm and cold as the central traits and the rest peripheral, the impressions shown in Group A were more positive than those in Group B (Ibid.). The content of other peripheral traits are built upon the central traits. It is understandable that not all traits are important for the final impression if one considers the possibility of misrepresentation in self-presentation. As Goffman mentioned, when we establish impression about others, “(…) we often give special attention to features of the performance that cannot be readily manipulated, thus enabling ourselves to judge the reliability of the more misrepresentable cues in the performance” (Goffman 1959, 66). This judgement of reliability would alter audience’s impressions about other (the actor) that might differ from the impression that is intended by the actor, which leads to discrepancy or misunderstanding of impression between actors and audiences.

3.2.2 Brunswik’s Lens Model

However, information on which impression formation of personality is based is not limited to individual traits, but also cues that are related to the individual. In preceding research that examined impression formation through personal profiles on SNS, research concluded that cues that are content-wise related to a profile owner such as profile photographs and personal description, as well as cues that were not related to the owner but appeared in the profile such as photographs of the owner’s friends. These influenced the profile viewer’s establishment of impressions of the owner’s personality (Walther et al. 2008; Utz 2010). In Utz’s study, participants established impressions of extraversion based on screenshots of two pre-arranged profiles. She showed that viewers’ impressions on popularity and social attractiveness, two embodiments of extraversion, were influenced jointly by the owner’s profile, profile pictures of friends, and the number of friends the person had (which were shown in the profile that was studied) (Utz 2010).

Nevertheless, in Utz’s (2010) study, it is Brunswik’s lens model (Brunswik 1956; Gigerenzer and Kurz 2001), not Asch’s theory, that is used as the framework in analysing impression formation of personality. In the lens model theory an observer makes inferences about the personality of other individuals through their behaviours and artefacts produced by them. This theory suggests that cues (behaviours and artefacts) related or surrounding an individual function as a lens through which other observers make impressions about the personality of the individual. Utz (2010) uses this model to explore impression formation through the two
pre-arranged personal profiles, in which profile pictures, photographs of owner’s friends, and the number of friends function as lens in the profile. Profile viewers use these lenses to make inferences and establish impressions about the owner’s personality. The Brunswik lens model used in this study is somewhat similar to semiotics, as the model is applied to analyse two screenshots of personal profiles. These screenshots are still images, and the profile picture, photographs of owner’s friends, and the number of friends can be regarded as signifiers in a semiotic perspective. They are similar in the way that meanings are reflected through a lens in the lens model and through signifiers in semiotics, which makes it possible to use semiotics as a theoretical framework in analysing impression formation, which will be explained in detail in the next section.

Brunswik’s lens model suggests that when a particular cue can accurately reflect the underlying personality characteristics of the individual, it is said to have cue validity (Brunswik 1956; Gigerenzer and Kurz 2001). The model conceptualises that observers do not rely on every possible cue in forming their impression about others, thus establishing the link between a cue and the observers’ utilisation of it as cue utilisation (Walther et al. 2008, 34). According to Brunswik, not all cues have validity in reflecting the individual’s personality. Asch seemed to have a similar conclusion, as he mentioned that “all traits do not have the same rank and value in the final impression” (Asch 1946, 270).

3.2.3 Summary

Asch’s theory is based on findings on the formation of impressions through linguistic cues that are provided prior to the formation, but not through face-to-face encounters. In his seminal research, Asch investigated the nature of establishing impressions through ten experiments in which participants conducted impression accounts of imaginary persons based on verbal presentations of a number of discrete characteristics that were said to belong to a particular imaginary person. He indicated, “We mention one which is of particular importance. It was a constant feature of our procedure to provide the subject (participants) with the traits of a person; but in actual observation the discovery of the traits in a person is a vital part of the process of establishing an impression” (Asch 1946, 289). However, due to the fact that this theory is based on impression formation through several limited linguistic traits, Asch’s theory is useful in the context of CMC, not face-to-face encounters in a physical sense, and in which impression formation is based on limited cues. Nevertheless, traits embedded in photographs in CMC are not as obvious and direct as the linguistic ones, which
require a process of extraction or decoding to obtain. Traits, such as intelligent, skilful, industrious, warm, and so on, are merely linguistic signifiers from a semiotic perspective. According to Asch, it is through these signifiers that participants can extract the underlying meaning so as to make inferences and form an impression of the person.

As mentioned in the previous section on self-presentation, Goffman’s concept of “social front” in which an actor performs (self-presents) is somewhat similar to the terminology of “signifier” in semiotics. Since it additionally allows for references to and has shown a connection to signifiers and understanding of hidden meanings in the signifiers, it is necessary to explore the academic field of semiotics and its potential in the analysis and discussion of self-presentation and impression formation in the context of CMC through online dating photographs.

### 3.3 Semiotics

In order to complete the theoretical framework that constructs the current study, this section discusses the theory of semiotics by going through the concepts of the signifier and signified, the mechanisms behind denotation and connotation. Additional the terms encoding and decoding and the potential application of this theory in analysing photographs in self-presentation and impression formation in CMC will be addressed. The discussion starts with Ferdinand de Saussure’s articulation of sign that was coined from a linguistic perspective, followed by Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall’s elaboration on the study of signs to the underlying messages and meanings. Finally, previous semiotics studies are analysed to discuss how the semiotics theory can be applied in studying photographs that are used for presenting the self and establishing impression about others.

#### 3.3.1 Signifier and Signified

One significant scholar in the development of semiology was the Swiss academic, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who is widely considered as one of the fathers of semiology (Nöth 1990; K. Smith et al. 2005). Due to the underlying linguistic obstacles in his original works, and in order to clarify the potential misunderstanding of time, this part is based on Course in General Linguistics (1966) that was finished by other scholars after Saussure’s death by combining his major works.
In Saussure’s terminology, a sign is not the same as signs in the conventional sense, such as a picture or a symbol, but a “whole”, a combination of both a signifier, such as a sound, a word, or a gesture, and the signified, the concept that the sound/word/gesture represents (Saussure 1966). The signified is not “a thing” but a concept, a “mental representation” of the “thing”, while the signifier is the form in which the concept is embodied (Barthes 1967). Additionally, Saussure (1966) suggested that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. He articulated this from a linguistic sense stating:

The idea of ‘sister’ is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French […] it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among languages and by the very existence of different languages […] (nevertheless) The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker […] I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified (Saussure 1966, 67–69).

In spite of the arbitrary nature of sign, for Saussure a sign is like a sheet of paper with the signifier on one side and the signified on the other; they are inseparable. The signifier and the signified are closely united, and each affects the other. However, Barthes (1967) argues that the closeness that a signifier and the signified share is acceptable only for the “frankly discontinuous systems, such as that of the language” (p. 49).

Building on Saussure’s model of semiotics that is primarily linguistic in nature, Barthes (1977b) expanded the notion of signifier and signified to a visual context. Using advertising images of a product, for example, he explained that certain attributes or signifiers of the product form the signifieds, the advertising message. In an image, a signifier is not limited to a single object or attribute, but can be a combination of several. As in the advertising image that he used in explaining sign, “its signifier is the bringing together of the tomato, the pepper and the tricoloured hues (yellow, green, red) of the poster; its signified is Italy or rather Italianicity” (Barthes 1977b, 34). Furthermore, Barthes argues that in the context of photographs:

[…] [A]t least at the level of the literal message – the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of ‘transformation’ but of ‘recording’ […] the scene is there,
captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical is here a guarantee of objectivity) (Barthes 1977b, 44).

A “literal message” is a message that the signified is based on the resemblance of signifiers. In contrary to Saussure’s arbitrariness between signifiers and signifieds in linguistics, Barthes maintained that the relationship between what is signified and the image signifying in analogical representation is not arbitrary, as “it is no longer necessary to do the relay with a third term in the guise of the psychic image of the object” (Barthes 1977b, 36). In other words, given a picture of an apple, the signifier is the apple in the picture, and the signified is the apple or an apple in general; the signified is based on the resemblance between the signifier and a physical apple, thus the connection between this signifier and this signified is no longer arbitrary in the sense that one cannot obtain an analogical signified of an orange from a signifier of an apple. In this context, different from the signified “Italianicity” and its signifier, signification is based on a certain transformation code. The signification between the apple in the picture and the concept of the apple is a message without code, which leads to the next discussion on denotation and connotation, a concept that involves the process of encoding and decoding between signifier and signified.

3.3.2 Denotation/Connotation

Semiotician Roland Barthes (1967) extended the concept of signified to include denotation and connotation. Denotation is the direct or literal meaning one gets from a sign; it is a description of the signified. Connotation, however, has a more complex meaning that is evoked by the signifier, that is, what is symbolised on a subjective level (Moriarty 2005). In Barthes’ theory, there is a first level and secondary meaning, in which denotation is the first level of meaning of signifier, and connotation is based on the denoted meaning and allows for further understanding or interpretation.

Barthes explained that connotation itself is a system that comprises signifiers, signifieds, and the process that unites the former to the latter (signification). He coined the term connotators for the signifiers that are made up of signs, both signifiers and signifieds of the denoted system (Barthes 1967). Barthes suggested that even if one connotator has only one signified of connotation, it could contain several denoted signs (for example, the signified “Italianicity” mentioned in the previous section). Barthes explains,
[...] the units of the connoted system do not necessarily have the same size as those of the denoted system: large fragments of the denoted discourse can constitute a single unit of the connoted system (this is the case, for instance, with the tone of a text, which is made up of numerous words, but which nevertheless refers to a single signified) (1967, 91).

For the signified of connotation, Barthes (1967) explained that while simultaneously general, global and diffuse, it is based very much on culture, knowledge and history. In a set of signs, each sign corresponds to different cultures, knowledge or history, in which individuals may vary in degrees. These constantly changing and varied elements make analysis of connotation difficult. As Barthes pointed out, “There is no particular analytical language corresponding to the particularity of its signifieds” (1977b, 47).

Moving from linguistics to photography, Barthes (1977a) clarifies that the photograph, as an “imitative” art, comprises two messages: a denoted message and a connoted message. On the one hand, a denoted message is obvious, which is the analogon itself. That is to say, when there is a picture of a cup, the visual sign resembles a particular cup, so it denotes this object. Denotation is like a message without a code. Even though a photograph is not exactly the reality itself, it is the perfect analogon of the reality which defines the photograph. On the other hand, a connoted message is more complex, since the message is reproduced through a system of signification. Elements in a photograph are seen as signifiers associated with certain socially constituted meanings, or in a word, signified. Connotation is a message with code; and culture, knowledge and history are the codes that are needed for extracting the message, or as Barthes (1977a, 17) suggests “a connoted message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it.” In the connoted system, the code is likely constituted either by universal symbolic order or by a period rhetoric, in short by a stock of stereotypes such as colours, gestures, expression, and so on (Barthes 1977a, 18).

3.3.3 Encoding/Decoding

Barthes (1977a) suggested that connotation is a message with code, while the production and reception of such discursive “codes” could be explained by a process of encoding and decoding (S. Hall 1980). According to Hall’s notion of encoding (1980, 129), production of a “message with code” is framed by codes such as conventional, historical, institutional
knowledge and ideologies, and so on. He suggested that decoding (the reception of the message) is a part of message production in the sense that it is the “‘point of departure for the realization’ of the message” (p. 130).

The encoded and decoded message, which could be conveyed in and out of linguistic or visual discourse (for example, photograph or video), are not identical but related, as they are different processes within the “totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole” (Ibid.). The two messages are not identical, because the codes used in encoding and decoding might not be flawlessly symmetrical. These codes correspond to Barthes’ notion of connotation, which indicates that the second level message of signifiers is culturally and historically related. For instance, nodding head means yes and shaking head means no are common sense in many countries, whereas they mean the opposite in some countries such as Bulgaria. That is to say, if an American has a conversation with a Bulgarian, the American encodes the message “Yes” by nodding his head, while the Bulgarian would decode a message of “No” from the American’s head movement. These two messages are not identical because the cultural codes that are used in encoding and decoding are not symmetrical.

The code of connotation is restricted in the sense that it operationalises under a dominant culture, not a determined culture. It is a dominant culture since “there exists a pattern of ‘preferred readings’ […]” The domains of ‘preferred meanings’ have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of ‘how things work for all practical purposes in this culture’ […]” (S. Hall 1980, 134). Despite the restricted property of code, the interpretation of a discourse is also individualised in that different decoded messages appear from the same discourse, which leads to the matter of misunderstandings.

Saussure’s concepts of signifier and signified underlie Barthes’ theoretical extension of denotation and connotation on which Hall’s encoding and decoding are based. Saussure’s model provides an analytical view for analysing signs, while Barthes’ connotation and Hall’s encoding/decoding provide a critical perspective in studying individual’s perception of visual content. The next section develops these theories further, and includes a discussion of photographs and explains the potential application of such theories in analysing self-presentation and impression formation in CMC.
3.3.4 Potential Application of Semiotics

Self-presentation and impression formation are not merely two independent processes; instead, they are a continuum that serves to communicate personal information from one end to the other. While self-presentation is performed in order to impose a particular impression upon an audience, impression formation is based on the information provided by the person’s presentation.

In communication, a message does not necessarily indicate a literal communication with textual content. Instead, the embodiment of message could be through different media such as photographs or as simple as a traffic light. When the red light is on, it simply sends a message to pedestrians or drivers indicating that one should not cross the street and should wait for the green light that connotes a message of consent. We know the message because we grew up with such conventional rules. Adopted in the news media, the press photograph is also considered a message.

 [...] This message is formed by a source of emission, a channel of transmission and a point of reception. The source of emission is the staff of the newspaper. [...] The point of reception is the public which reads the paper. As for the channel of transmission, this is the newspaper itself [...] a complex of concurrent messages with the photograph as centre and surrounds constituted by the text, the title, the caption [...] (Barthes 1977a, 15).

As briefly mention before, Utz (2010) in her empirical study examined how participants can establish an impression of an individual’s personality based on screenshots of two online profiles. She did not mention in any discourse the concept of semiotics, as she used the Brunswik lens model. She studied participants’ impression formation through how they would conceive and interpret three features in the profile, profile photographs, photographs of the owner’s friends, and the number of friends. These three features were referred to as cues; however, from a semiotic perspective, these cues are merely signifiers, and participants’ responses to these cues are nothing but signifieds. Her analysis between the cues and the responses are the study of signs in semiology. Extraversion, the personality type on which the study focused, is the connotation of those signifiers, and it is a message with code, a message that one cannot get without understanding the concept of extraversion. As the profiles were pre-arranged by Utz, it is her understanding of the relationship among these signifiers and
signifieds that allows her to “self-present” for the profile owner according to different intended connotations or messages. The empirical study implies a potential application of semiotics in studying self-presentation and impression formation through photographs in CMC. In addition, some of the participants failed to anticipate the intended personality from the profile, which indicates a potential use of Hall’s encoding/decoding in discussing misunderstanding caused by dating photographs.

The decoded message/meaning or signified of signifiers are not constant across time and geographical dimensions. The same signifier could imply different things for different people at different times in different locations; it is “less fixed and therefore more conventionalised and changeable, associative meanings, which clearly vary from instance to instance and therefore must depend on the intervention of codes” (S. Hall 1980, 133). As Barthes pointed out, there is no particular analytical language corresponding to the particularity of its signifieds (1977b, 47). Even though there are such tools as dictionaries and guidebooks that list connotations and signifieds for all imaginable signifiers, these might not necessarily be applicable for research that is being conducted right now, right here in Sweden. Because of that, this study does not essentially aim at analysing the contents of all kinds of dating photographs in Qruiser based on the author’s personal perspective of culture and history, but rather on how online daters determine certain signifiers while conducting self-presentation and impression formation, so as to further discuss the misunderstandings or discrepancies among interpretations on the dating photographs.

3.4 Summary

In summary, this chapter has discussed several concepts that construct the theoretical framework of the study: Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical self-presentation and Walther’s (1992) selectivity in self-presentation, Asch’s (1946) individual’s traits and Brunswik’s (1956) lens (or cues) in impression formation, Saussure’s (1966) signifier/signified, Barthes’ (1967) denotation/connotation, and Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding in semiotics.

It might seem a lot to take in at the first glance, which is why Figure 1 can help clarify this complex yet interrelated theoretical framework. Goffman mentions that an actor employs a social front, including a setting and personal front for his performance. A dating photograph could be regarded as the performance where a dater presents himself. What are shown in the photograph, such as background, jewellery and facial expressions, are the social fronts for the
performance. These social fronts in the photographs are signifiers from the semiotic perspective. Walther’s selective self-presentation, however, allows for knowledge of signifieds and connotations to interfere and manipulate the signifiers one uses in the presentation of self. The traits and lens (or cues) are merely the signifiers that evoke the connotation for impression formation. Additionally, it is a matter of encoding and decoding while using photographs for self-presentation and impression formation in online dating because to self-present is to encode a certain message through arrangement of signifiers in photographs; and to establish an impression is to decode or extract the message that is coded in a set of signs in photographs. It is this complex and yet simple interrelation that builds up the firm theoretical framework to construct that the whole study in self-presentation and impression formation in CMC from a semiotic perspective.

In this study of online dating, the signifier, selectivity and encoding could be applied to analyse and understand the process of gay online daters’ choice of dating photographs that are intended for self-presentation. Traits are considered a mere signifier in Asch’s (1946) study of impression formation. However, while studying impression formation through photographs, traits are both signifieds and signifiers simultaneously. From different lenses or signifiers in photographs, a dater obtains signifieds, or traits; and these traits are themselves signifiers that offer a further connotation, a message with code, or an impression. The current study uses concepts such as lens, signifiers, signified, connotation and decoding in the examination of gay online daters’ interpretation of dating photographs, from which impressions are formed. Studying both self-presentation and impression formation facilitates an extended discussion on misunderstanding of impression through photographs among daters.

After the discussion of the firm theoretical framework that supports the present study, the following chapter addresses the methodology that operationalises the study. It motivates the choice of netnography and autoethnography as principal data collection for this study, and includes detailed discussions of procedures such as sampling, recruitment and interviews as well as ethical issues that should be taken into consideration in this study.
4. Methodology

To investigate and understand the self-presentation and impression formation through photographs in CMC, this chapter introduces the methodology of the current study, which is designed as netnographic with a touch of autoethnography. Figure 2 depicts the complex structure of methodology. A brief introduction is given here before discussing different methods individually.

This study is a combination of netnography and autoethnography. There are several different methods: participant observation, online interviews, group discussion, and the author’s experience of choosing and presenting photographs. First, participant observation is involved in both parts of the study. In netnography, the participant observes self-presentation through dating photographs. However, it is also an autoethnographic method in that personal experience is used in forming impressions about the participants from their photographs. In “choosing and presenting photographs”, the author’s personal experience of self-presentation is used for the autoethnographic study. Finally, online interviews and group discussions are conducted to ascertain both the participants’ experience of self-presentation and their impressions of the author from the chosen photographs.

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*Figure 2. The Structure of Methodology*

The following section begins with a discussion of the underlying property of netnography and autoethnography and the motivation for choosing such an approach. This is followed by a description of research procedures, which include the beginning stages of profile manipulation and continue through the final stages of data analysis. Due to the ethnographic
characteristic of this research, which involves study of human beings, the chapter ends with a discussion of ethical issues that the research takes into consideration.

4.1 Netnography and Autoethnography

The study is designed as a combination of netnography and autoethnography. Netnography, as Kozinets maintains, is a research based on participant-observational online fieldwork, which uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at an ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon (2010, 60). Similar to ethnography, netnography stresses the common need for a basis of participant observation, which allows researchers to obtain a detailed and nuanced understanding of social phenomena so as to capture and convey their cultural qualities (Kozinets 2010, 55). Similarly, Dick Hobbs (2006, 101) points out that time consuming personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding their reality under a particular culture or social setting. However, participant observation is not the only method for data collection in netnography. There are other approaches that could be applied, such as interviews, descriptive statistics, archival data collection, extended historical case analysis, videography, projective techniques, semiotics analysis, and the like (Kozinets 2010, 60).

Compared to ethnography, netnography has two major advantages. Firstly, it has the option of invisible observation and the ability to perfectly track communal conversations in any time period (Ibid. 56). Instead of being physically there with participants in order to observe their actions and hear their conversation, a netnographer might sit in front of a personal computer to observe the participants’ behaviour. Secondly, conversation taking place in an online sphere could be recorded and stored as it is through copy/paste, screenshots, and so on; and it could be reviewed anytime during the study. However in conducting ethnography, although there are means such as audio and video recorders that enable researcher to record conversation among participants, the conversation is not perfectly recorded since cues such as eye contact between participants might not be captured.

On the other hand, autoethnography is a qualitative research method that “focuses on self as a study subject but transcends a mere narration of personal history (…) (it) enables researchers to use data from their own life stories as situated in sociocultural contexts in order to gain an understanding of society through the unique lens of self” (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2012, 18). One distinct characteristic of autoethnography is the use of personal experience to
critically examine cultural experience (S. L. H. Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013). Different from ethnography, autoethnography focuses on the researchers’ subjective experience rather than interaction with others. However, although it does not require participant observation and engagement with others, Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2012, 18) suggest that autoethnography still aims to examine the cultural interpretation and the connectivity between self and others. This is related to the concept *reflexivity* in autoethnography, which entails taking seriously the self’s location in culture and scholarship, circumspectly exploring researchers’ relationships in autoethnography (Berry 2013, 212). That is what makes autoethnography inherently different from an autobiography, which focuses on personal stories.

Autoethnographers use personal stories as windows to the world, through which they interpret how their selves are connected to their sociocultural contexts and how the contexts give meanings to their experiences and perspectives [...] They tell stories to explain how they respond to their environments in certain ways and how their sociocultural contexts have shaped their perspectives, behaviours, and decisions (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez 2012, 18–19).

Despite the narrative, story-telling characteristics, autoethnography seeks to understand a broader sociocultural phenomenon from a personal perspective. For that reason, instead of observing the experiences of others, autoethnography stresses the researchers’ personal, subjective experiences. In this personal narrative, autoethnographers see themselves as “the phenomenon and write evocative stories specifically focused on their academic as well as their personal lives” (Ellis 2004, 45).

### 4.1.1 Motivation for Choice

To examine and understand the underlying nature of gay online daters’ self-presentation and impression formation through photographs in CMC, the study is designed as netnographic and autoethnographic. There are various reasons why an ethnography-based method was chosen. First, ethnography is a study of a culture, which in this study is represented by the gay online dating community. Second, ethnography strives to understand a certain cultural or communal phenomenon, which is the fact that some online daters use photographs in presenting themselves and establish impression about others. Finally, it is the underlying CMC context
of an online dating community in which such phenomenon takes place, which leads to a choice of netnography over ethnography.

Why Autoethnography?

Autoethnography was chosen as a supplementary method. One main reason is that both self-presentation and impression formation are, to a varying extent, personal and individualised, in the sense that different people might present themselves differently and see things differently. The other reason is performative in that they could not be fully understood through simple narration of others unless one has taken part in such social practice, as in “I have done that”.

As a homosexual myself, I have been using online dating service for five years during which I have presented myself through different photographs and viewed innumerable photographs of others. I am not saying that I am an experienced online dater, but those five years are long enough for me to integrate myself into the culture of online dating and to understand the mechanisms of the genre. In addition, as I am from Hong Kong, which has a very different culture from the Sweden in many aspects, such as the acceptability of homosexuality, it might somehow influence my experience in self-presentation and impression formation, which could provide a different insight into these complex issues. However, in the autoethnographic approach in this study, it is not the personal experience from long ago that I aim to make narrative on, but on the experience during the period of the present study. Autoethnography strives to understand a cultural phenomenon through a lens of narration based on personal experience. It allows the author to transit from an outsider’s perspective to an insider’s (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995), which might provide a supplementary unique understanding of self-presentation and impression formation.

There might be some opposition regarding subjectivity in using autoethnography. However, Bochner and Ellis (2006) do not consider subjectivity invalid in a cultural study. “If culture circulates through all of us, how can autoethnography be free of connection to a world beyond the self?” (p. 24) All in all, autoethnography provides the author’s experience as extra material, since “[w]hat matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller – to see the world from her or his point of view, even if this world does not match reality” (Plummer 2001, 401).
Choice of Methods

Even though netnography highly stresses participant observation, this study primarily focuses on empirical data from online interviews and group discussions, and secondarily on participant observation. This is because this investigation targets self-presentation and impression formation, which are two different processes. Self-presentation is observable as a researcher can simply look at the daters’ profiles and see the kinds of photographs that have been uploaded for self-presentation. However, impression formation is observable only if a researcher could stand next to an online dater in front of a computer and observe how he clicks through different photographs. In order to understand how a person establishes an impression of others requires a narrative of how he or she sees a certain picture, and this narrative could be best captured through an interview (see, for example, Farquhar 2013).

Interviews are also useful in understanding how online daters conceptualise the process of their self-presentation through certain signifiers in photographs. Studies have shown that much of what is identified as anthropology/ethnography is based on what researchers hear rather than what they see. It has been argued that ethnography is not participant observation, and it should not be conceptualised as a method but as a purpose or an outcome (Forsey 2010; Hockey and Forsey 2012). All in all, this is a netnographic and autoethnographic study, which bases its analysis on interviews, participant observation and self-narration.

4.2 Procedure

The empirical part of the current study starts with management of the dating profile, the portal for the author to connect with other gay online daters. Discourse centres around the selection of participants, followed by an explanation of the process of data collection through participant observation, online interviews and group discussions, and a discussion on the validity of the research study.

4.2.1 Profile Setting

Before making an overly eager contact with a member of an online community, it is advisable that a researcher should familiarise himself with the online community that he is considering studying, including its members, language, interests and practices (Kozinets 2010, 79). As previously mentioned, I have been a member and participated in Qruiser since 2010, which
suggests that I am rather familiar with the cultural environment in the community. However, I have always identified myself as a user of the site, not as a researcher.

As a first step, I decided to use my personal profile and turn it into a researcher profile. The justification for this is that the profile clearly states that I have been a member since 2010-11-05, a fact which I hoped would gain participant trust. I determined that I would not be judged as merely a random researcher who casually chose Qruiser and subsequently created a profile to conduct an empirical study, as trust seems to be a central matter in ethnography (Maanen 1979). Every personal detail is editable, which makes it possible to revamp my profile into a researcher profile. I changed my username to Forskare (researcher), deleted and hid all personal details, such as menu-driven personal facts (height, body type, personality, civil status, free time interests, and the like). I rewrote my presentation text, changing it from...
personal to clearly stating my purpose and research aim in both English and Swedish (see Appendices 1 and 2) (as suggested by Kozinets 2010, 147; see for example Farquhar 2013). I was well aware of the fact that to achieve the aim of the research, i.e., to determine self-presentation and impression formation through photographs, any cues other than photographs would influence others’ impressions (Utz 2010). I created my researcher identity, indicating that I was a master student and the aim of the research, which was written in the QX profile, was a textual presentation. However, this was not the same self-presentation text I would have used to clarify who I am as a gay online dater in his mid-20s, as this would have minimalised the influence on the impression participants formed about me.

In profiles on Qruiser, besides photo albums, daters can upload a main profile photograph (which is referred to as a “face image” on Qruiser) and insert a “homepage image” that is shown right above the presentation text (as shown in Figure 3). These were the areas where the photographs I had chosen were presented.

Finally, as previously mentioned, Utz’s study (2010) showed that information generated by others (such as profile photographs of owner’s friends), which were shown in the profile would influence participants’ impressions; however, this would not be the case in the current study. In the profile on Qruiser, there are three possible sections that could include such other-generated information: first, a visitor’s list, which shows who has visited the profile; second, a visitors’ book, on which visitors can leave messages and become visible to other profile viewers; and last but not least, public favourite, in which it is possible to show the person’s favourite users (in which the profile photograph of the favourite users are shown). For this study all three sections were set as private only, making the information invisible to other participants so as not to influence their judgement based on my photographs. The preparation of the profile setting was followed by the selection of participants for observation and interviews.

**4.2.2 Subjects, Sampling and Recruitment**

This study focuses on gay online daters in Qruiser; however, given thousands of gay users in this community, it would be difficult and time consuming to recruit all of them as participants. Therefore, due to time limitations a sample size of 200 gay online daters was chosen for participant observation. Eighteen online daters were selected for interviews (of which two were chosen from the 200 online daters for participant observation), and four users
(two couples) were selected for group discussion. The primary method for recruitment was to randomly choose from the user list within the six age categories of users in Qruiser: under 19 years old, 20 to 29, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59, and above 60, according to the distribution 8%, 37%, 26%, 17%, 8%, and 4% respectively, with population mean age of 33.73 (Qruiser.com 2014b). However, this age distribution was limited to those chosen for participant observation. Interviewees were not limited by age, as their recruitment was voluntary. To include participants for observation according to the population age distribution, the sample would be at least somewhat representative. Furthermore, using age distribution would provide a wider range of photograph types, since it is suggested that people in different age groups would be more likely to employ different photographs to present themselves (Strano 2008).

To “randomly” recruit participants, the candidates needed to fulfil at least two simple requirements: first, they were neither acquainted with nor had they had any personal encounters with the researcher; second, they had to have a “homepage image” in their presentation text other than the one that is defined as a “face image” – the main profile photograph. The first requirement was decided upon, because this research aims to study the first impression that is made based on photographs. If a participant knows the researcher personally, the impression made would be influenced by previous knowledge the participant may have about the researcher. One reason for the second requirement is that the size of the face image is rather small, and users cannot click on it to enlarge it. Therefore, it would be difficult to observe a user’s self-presentation through a minimised main profile photograph. The other reason is that the research is intended to study the first impression that is made, and the “homepage image” is the first large photograph that other daters would see of the profile owner.

During the recruitment process for interviews and group discussion, the author was open for snowball sampling. It was chosen in case there were other online researchers in the same community, its members might be sceptical about academic studies (Kozinets 2010), and would most likely refuse to participate if any requests appeared. However, they might agree if it were through referral from a friend who had recently participated in the study.
4.2.3 Participant Observation

The main function of participant observation in this study is to observe participants’ dating photographs used for self-presentation, primarily based on their “face image” and “homepage image”. As previously discussed, due to the nature of impression formation, data collection is primarily based on online interviews rather than participant observation. During the observation, any thoughts or attitudes on the participants’ photographs were recorded as field notes. These notes were secured with passwords and saved only on a local computer, not on any online storage service.

During the observation, the author was open to every possible signifier or social front in the pictures, from settings such as location (where the photograph was taken) to personal fronts, such as clothing and facial expression. There are several questions that the author asked himself while observing the photographs: Was the participant alone in the photograph? Did he take the picture or did someone else take it? Did he look into the camera when the picture was taken? How did he dress? What facial expression did he have? Where were the pictures taken, indoors, outdoors, or some special locations? Did the picture look edited? Notes were written down for all the observed pictures in order to find potential patterns in the presentation of self through photographs.

In this study, which is simultaneously netnographic and autoethnographic, participant observation is a part of the autoethnographic study, since to narrate on impression formation requires observation of others’ dating photographs; hence, observing participants’ self-presentation is at the same time a process of impression formation on the participants. The personal impressions of the participants were also recorded in the field notes. The accounts of personal impression are the foundation for the narration and analysis of personal experience in impression formation in the autoethnographic section.

However, similar information was obtained through online interviews as well, as in the interview, participants were asked to describe how they presented themselves through photographs, why they would present certain categories of photographs in their dating profiles, how impressions of the author were made, and what were their impressions of the author.
4.2.4 Online Interviews

Online interviews were conducted in the form of messages that were enabled by the dating site Quirser. The online interviews were conducted around two main topics. First, the researcher discussed with interviewees their reasons for choosing the photographs that were used in their profiles. From the interviews in the first stage combined with participant observation, main categories of photographs used in gay online dating were determined. As mentioned, the researcher’s choice of his own photographs was partially based on these categories. In the second stage, online interviews were conducted to understand participants’ impression formation through photographs. The target on which participants were asked to establish an impression was the researcher himself.

The online interviews generally followed the procedures listed below:

1. Introduction and Consent – The researcher always started by clarifying the purpose of the study, potential used of interview material, and anonymity of the participant’s identity. Most importantly, the interviewees were well informed about their rights to refuse the interviews, and their option to withdraw their consent during the interviews.
2. Now or Later? – In most cases, before asking the opening question, the interviewees started writing their opinions together with the consent. They wrote their personal opinion based on the research purpose that was presented to them. In some cases, interviewees required a later interview.
3. Opening Questions – Although some interviewees started talking about their opinions and experiences, if the responses did not fit, the researcher would indirectly go back and state the intended opening questions. For interviews focusing on self-presentation, the opening question was typically, “Why did you choose the two pictures in your profile?” For impression formation, the discussion usually began with, “What impression of me (the author) do you have from the two pictures on my profile?”
4. Deeper Discussion – Based on participants’ responses to the opening questions, the discussion varied among interviewees. However, the discussion was always framed by questions that were related to the purpose of the study.
5. Supplements and Opinions about the Interview – Near the end of the interviews, interviewees were asked if they had more to add to the discussion or concerning the topic. Furthermore, they were asked to comment on the interview with the researcher and their thoughts about doing an online interview.
As there were different photographs ("face image" and "homepage image") requiring impressions from participants, those who agreed on participating in an online interview were each presented certain photographs (see for example Utz 2010). It was shown that people’s impressions referred to and were influenced by previous experiences (Asch 1946, 289). That is to say, as it is the first impression that is of interest, if all different photographs are presented to the same interviewee, knowledge from preceding “face image” or “homepage image” would likely interfere with the impression based on the latter ones. The idea of online interviews was to compare impressions from different interviewees, who were presented with the same photographs, and to examine the discrepancies among the interpreted impressions.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Swedish and some were in English. Many interviewees did not realise that the author was not a native Swedish speaker until the author pointed this out. The interview discussions were fluent with only minor ambiguities, which ensured the reliability of the material from online interviews. As the online interviews were conducted in a form of messages, all conversations were directly copied and recorded in a secured word file in the original language and stored in a local computer only. The interviews had different lengths ranging from 1.5 pages to 8 pages, since some interviewees gave very brief answers while others replied with detailed opinions. The texts were translated into English by the author only when they were cited in the thesis.

4.2.5 Group Discussion

In addition to online interviews, a group discussion was conducted to discuss users’ experiences of self-presentation and impression formation on Qruiser. The original idea was to conduct focus groups according to age in order to explore the potential difference in self-presentation and impression formation among different age groups. However, there were several difficulties in the recruitment for participants for focus groups. First, invitations were sent to many users, but only a few responded, and only two replied with a positive answer saying that they and their partner would like to participate in the group interview. Second, it was difficult to arrange a time and place that was suitable for everyone, as participation was completely voluntary. Third, it was difficult to motivate online daters to join the study, as there was no compensation for the participation. Fourth, the research study was executed only by the researcher, but it is widely suggested that a focus group should be led by a moderator – someone other than the researcher himself – who has no direct interest in the outcome in order to obtain unbiased data (Powell and Single 1996; Morgan 1996; Rabiee 2004).
Due to the limited number of participants, a group discussion was held at Ekonomikum Uppsala University instead of focus groups. The two couples, Ming and Philip, and James and Nick (pseudonyms) confirmed that they did not know the other couple. Before the interviews and group discussion, participants were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix 3). Several minutes before the discussion started, participants were provided with drinks and cookies, so that they could interact informally. It was hoped that this would “break the ice” among participants, so as to “[relax] the participants and foster an atmosphere conducive to frank discussion” (Powell and Single 1996, 502). During one hour and nine minutes of group discussion, participants were encouraged to interact with each other on the topic of self-presentation and impression formation through dating photographs. The group discussion was followed by the transcription process, which took two days to fully transcribe.

4.2.6 Personal Experience

One feature characteristic of autoethnography is the use of the author’s experiences and narratives as study material. The experiences and narratives in this study were narrowed down to the period of the study. The material for autoethnography includes field notes of impressions that were formed viewing 387 pictures of participants and field notes of thoughts in the experience of choosing seven photographs for self-presentation. During the practice of impression formation, instead of merely writing down several discrete adjectives, I wrote a rounded sentence for each participant describing how I think the participant is as a person. For example, instead of writing “energetic, outgoing, serious”, I would write, “He is a lively person who likes to socialise with his friends or colleagues in his free time, but he is serious and responsible about his work”.

As part of the autoethnographic study, I uploaded photographs of myself to those sections in order to exercise self-presentation in the context of online dating. There were seven different photographs (which are presented in chapter 5) uploaded in different time periods, so that when I conducted interviews with different participants, they could establish an impression about me according to different photographs. These photographs were chosen based partially on the main categories of photographs from observation and from discussion through interviews in the initial state of the research; and partially on my own perception of self-presentation, i.e., which photograph would present certain aspects of my personality. The process of choosing these photographs, was the basis of my narration of subjective experiences in self-presentation from a semiotic view.
From the personal experience in choosing the seven photographs of me, there is one thing that is important to point out. Although I was heavily exposed to the study of self-presentation through photographs from the semiotic perspective and the assumption that daters would try to imply a message through self-presenting photographs, I did not pay particular attention to encoding meanings to signifiers deliberately when I selected the photos of me for the presentation on Qruiser. Instead of as a researcher, I chose the photographs as I normally would have if I were an online dater. I did not notice any significant difference from previous experiences. That is, the interviews were a discussion of daters’ impressions from photographs that were chosen by a gay online dater rather than by a researcher.

4.2.7 Validity

Given that this research study is netnographic and autoethnographic, the validity of the study should be examined from two aspects.

On the one hand, there are several points that should be made regarding the netnographic study. As pointed out in Section 2.3, except for the username, none of the information on Qruiser.com is compulsory, which means there are dating profiles with only text presentation or only pictures available for viewers. In other words, excluding sections other than pictures on the researcher’s profile did not necessarily turn the study from an ethnographic nature into an experimental setting. Additionally, in regard to the group discussion, the two couples who might present themselves or see things differently from single online daters were once online daters on Qruiser and have been using Qruiser for 9 years, so that they could still provide insight from their previous experience. Nevertheless, this research study does not intend to generalise the findings for the entire population, given the inherent limitation in time and resources in this master thesis. A qualitative research should not aim at generalising the findings, but on collecting data that offers “intensive insight into the complex human and social phenomena in specific circumstances” (Deacon et al. 2007, 45).

On the other hand, for an autoethnographic research, validity means that the research seeks verisimilitude (Ellis 2004). In autoethnography, validity can be about whether “[I]t evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible. You also can judge validity by whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers—or even your own.” (Ellis 2004, 124). Additionally, there is validity from using the author’s self as data.
Personally the author had used online dating for at least five years and met many people through online dating sites. He has been influenced by and become familiar with the culture of online dating. This has (somewhat) “qualified” him as a reliable source on online dating, rather than a mere researcher attempting to extract information. The narration is based on personal experience during the research period, which is relatively recent. It is then more likely that the narration is “as close to the experience as you [researcher] can remember it” (Ellis 2004, 126).

4.3 Ethical Issues

To conduct an ethical netnographic study, there are issues that should be considered, such as whether the online community being studied is public or private, “pragmatics of informed consent”, “harm” that could be done to participants, and the “pseudonymous complexities of quotation and citation” (Kozinets 2010, 146). Qruiser is a public and a private community at the same time. It is public in the sense that anyone can register to become a member, and there are no requirements for identity verification. Meanwhile, it is this registration process that makes Qruiser somewhat private, as in order to fully view other users’ dating profiles and to start a conversation with them requires a membership. In spite of the easy accessibility of Qruiser, it is advised that asking for permission is required while attempting to conduct research in communities that require membership and registration (Kozinets 2010, 148). As advised, the author attempted to ask for permission from the support group of Qruiser who then suggested the author contact the community director. In March, permission for conducting the research in Qruiser was granted directly from the community director. In addition, polices and terms of use under the frequently asked questions (FAQs) are checked so as to make sure that the research does not violate any existing rules. As Kozinets (2010, 147) suggests, “The foundation of an ethical netnography is honesty between the researcher and online community members”. Therefore, as mentioned in the previous section, “Profile Setting”, the purpose and aim of the research and the intention of the researcher are clearly stated in the researcher’s profile (as advised by Kozinets 2010, 147). However, consent from participants whose photographs were observed was not asked for. As Kozinets (2010) advised, consent is required only when intervention occurs.

In general, as a netnographer interacts normally in the online community or culture, that is, as she interacts as other members do on the site but also takes field-notes of
her experiences, there is no need to gain informed consent for those interactions (Kozinets 2010, 151).

Consent from participants whose photographs were observed is not necessary in this study since no harm has been done to the participants. None of their photographs are stored or presented in any way in the study; furthermore, no personal information of participants is used in this study, including usernames, as they are considered to be traceable and should be treated as real names (Kozinets 2010, 153). There is no possible way in which the participants could be identified. Nevertheless, online interviews and citations of interview conversations were made only under the circumstances where the participants (interviewees) had given the author permission to do so. Additionally, interviewees’ names appearing in this study are all pseudonym coded by the author.

In conclusion, the information on the participants is secured, and their portraits and usernames are not used in the study, so that they cannot be traced and identified. The risk of damage to them is minimal. The AoIR (Association of Internet Research) ethical guidelines were reviewed in order to ensure that this study followed ethical procedures in data collection and handling (for detail information see Markham and Buchanan 2012).
5. Results and Analysis

Participant observation, online interviews, group discussion, and personal experience constitute the empirical data that supports the current study in examining photographs in the context of online dating. For participant observation, 200 online daters were selected according to the age distribution on Qruiser (as mentioned in Section 4.2), with ages ranging from 18 to 61 years old (sample mean = 33.04, which is closed to the population mean of 33.73 years old (Qruiser.com 2014b)). During the observation, some online daters contacted the researcher through messages volunteering to take part in an online interview that was scheduled to take place after the initial observation was completed. The voluntary interviewees were accepted for the reason that they might cover some population demographics that were not reached during the selection of participants for observation. In the study, 18 online daters were interviewed (of whom two were from the 200 online daters for participant observation), with eight interviews focusing on self-presentation and ten interviews on impression formation, and a face-to-face group discussion with four online daters. In total, 220 online daters were included in this empirical study. Finally, personal experience was based on both the author’s impression from observing participants’ self-presentation through photographs, and the author’s selection of photographs for his own presentation. All thoughts or feelings were recorded as field notes during the experience. Data from observation, interviews, and experience constitute the foundation of this empirical study.

In this chapter, the discussion of data analysis and results is divided into sections that answer the three research questions in self-presentation, impression formation, and misunderstanding of impression from photographs. In the first section, a list of categories of dating photograph, created during participant observation, shows the most commonly identified types of photographs used for self-presentation and impression formation. The following section continues with an analysis of participants’ accounts, as a profile owner, of self-presentation through photographs, followed by the author’s narrative of personal experience. The third section, changes the perspective from profile owner to profile viewer, focusing on a discussion regarding participants’ impressions about the author through dating photographs, their perception of impression formation through semiotics cues, and, once again, the author’s narrative of personal experience. Finally, in the fourth section, the author, summarising discussions from both self-presentation and impression formation, reviews the possibilities of misunderstanding in impression caused by dating photographs.
5.1 Categories

As the focus of the current study, photographs can be presented in three ways on Qruiser. First, a photograph can be used as a “face image” or commonly known as a profile picture. Secondly, a photograph can be inserted as a “homepage image” right above the personal presentation text. Last but not least, photographs can be uploaded and grouped into a photo album, in which each photograph is given a separate caption that describes it. Photographs that were selected for observation include only “face image” and “homepage image”. The reason that photo albums were not observed is that the number of pictures in albums varies among dates from 0 to 30, or even 60 in the case of a gold membership. Limiting the observation to only two pictures for most of the participants ensures an equal observation for each participant. This may minimise the variance of observation and enable a more systematic analysis of self-presentation through photographs. Most of the 200 selected participants for observation had both “face images” and “homepage images” (for example see Figure 1 in Section 4.2). In total 387 photographs were analytically viewed for the observation of self-presentation, as several participants did not have a “face image”.

The observation of dating photographs on Qruiser leads to the insight that there are certain patterns in the photos that are used for presentation. It was possible to identify several categories of commonly used photographs, including 151 self-portraits (commonly known as “selfies”), 146 daily pictures, 20 travel pictures, 9 sexually explicit pictures, 27 pictures of objects (which contain objects rather than the participant himself), and 35 black and white pictures (B&W). The numbers do not add up to 387 because there is overlap between B&W and other categories; for example, a B&W self-portrait was included in both the B&W and self-portrait categories. Most categories support the finding of past research on selection of photographs for self-presentation (Strano 2008). One distinction from previous findings is the inclusion of sexually explicit pictures. This is due to Qruiser’s tolerant policy toward pornographic content on the website. Previous study has classified photographs according to personal aspects, such as social, humour, and vanity (Farquhar 2013), whereas categories in this study were divided from a semiotic perspective. Except for the last category, B&W, all the others were categorised according to the social front, such as what was taken, settings of the picture, and how it was taken. All six categories could be justified from the semiotic aspects.
Self-portrait. This category has two sub-categories that are classified according to the personal front nudity, which Soley and Reid (1988) once used as the criterion to examine photographs in magazine. These two sub-categories are self-portraits where participants are fully dressed and those where participants are shirtless. The second sub-category does not include photographs where participants are fully naked; instead, these were classified under the category sexually explicit, as the content would shift from non-sexual to pornographic.

Figure 4. A self-portrait of the author (fully dressed) in front of a mirror

Figure 5. A self-portrait of the author (shirtless) by a lake

A self-portrait photograph is normally taken with a hand-held camera phone or digital camera. Figure 4 and Figure 5 are the self-portrait photographs of the author that were presented on the Qruiser profile during the study. From a semiotic point of view, there are several signifiers that distinguish a self-portrait: a reflection of a mobile phone in a mirror (for example, figure 4), a part of an arm pointing toward the camera, and a short distance between an individual and the camera (for example, figure 5). From these signifiers, one can evoke the concept of “self-portrait”. Due to the limited length of the human arm and the mechanical limitation of the camera, a self-portrait normally contains limited content, such as only part of the human body or a narrow background. Due to the distance between an individual and the camera, a
self-portrait usually clearly features the individual’s face, which, when used on an online dating site, gives viewers an idea of how an individual looks. However, figure 4 obviously proves an exception. With the assistance of a mirror or other equipment, one can break through the limitation of the human arm so as to increase the distance between the individual and the camera and include more contents in a photograph.

![Figure 6. A daily picture of the author eating in a café](image1)

![Figure 7. A travel picture of the author at the Great Wall of China](image2)

**Daily pictures.** The signifier that distinguishes such pictures is the social front, which includes both settings and personal front. This very common picture captures an individual in daily activities in different settings such as having dinner with friends in a restaurant or showing himself in work uniform at his work place. This picture is usually taken by another individual. A daily picture primarily shows a particular living routine of the individual. Unlike self-portraits that are defined in this study, it is possible that daily pictures involve other individuals. Some studies contain a separate category for such photographs, “social pictures” (Farquhar 2013). However, these kinds of pictures are included in daily pictures because of the minor proportion of such photographs under the participant observation. In addition, participants’ accounts have shown the unimportance of such social photographs in the context
of online dating: “I don’t feel the need to have to show more of my life here on Qruiser. (…) Nor do I think that people who upload pictures with social coherence are more social than those who don’t do so.” An example of a daily picture is shown in Figure 6, in which the author was captured eating at a café.

**Travel pictures.** Among many photographs that were observed, pictures from trips are a commonly used category. It is possible that a travel picture could be classified under the same category as daily pictures, since it is also a photo of an individual in a certain social context. However, in a travel picture, the focus might not be only on the individual, but also on the setting of the photograph, or in other words, where the picture was taken. A travel picture is different from a daily picture because of its setting. The setting is often a unique location that is not the hometown of the individual. It requires extra effort in the movement behind the photographs. Figure 7 is a sample of a travel picture, which was taken at the Great Wall of China.

**Sexually explicit pictures.** The signifier that categorises these pictures is the personal front rather than the setting. As stated before, this refers to pictures where an individual is fully naked, and it could have been listed under the category of self-portrait where an individual is shirtless. However, this is an independent category, as the contents are more explicit and pornographic than a portrait of a shirtless self. This difference is obvious since a magazine with advertisements that contain shirtless male models is still considered a normal commercial magazine, while a magazine is regarded as “porn” if it contains photographs that involve naked models in sexually suggestive poses. Nevertheless, no sexually explicit pictures of the author are included in either the personal experience of self-presentation or this article. One major reason is the personal preference of self-presentation through photographs, which will be addressed in detail in the later section of the personal narrative.

**Pictures of objects.** Photographs that fall in this category do not involve any individuals. It could be, for example, a picture of a sculpture, a cat, a plate of food, and so on. Although the first intention was to include only portraits of participants, the observation showed that considerable numbers of such pictures were used in self-presentations on Qruiser. Figure 8 shows an example of a picture of an object. It is a screenshot of the original photograph, since the owner could not find the original digital format. The author was authorised to use the picture in this study as long as “© GC 2006” was added to the screenshot.
Black and white pictures. The last category in this study involves photographs that are toned in black and white. This category is from a different criterion. Previous categories were based on the social front while this is based on the colour. The property black and white was regarded as one of the semiotic signifiers during the observation of self-presentation. The social front of these pictures could belong to one of the above categories; the only difference is that they are presented in B&W. For example, the B&W picture in Figure 9 could also belong to the category of a fully dressed self-portrait.

Figure 8. A screenshot of a picture of a dragon in a participant’s profile

Figure 9. A black and white picture of the author
These six categories have roughly summarised the photographs that were used for self-presentation on Qruiser. The category “sexually explicit pictures” might not be common on other online dating sites, as many of those sites do not allow their users to publish photographs that contain sexual content (for example firstdate.com). However, these categories of photographs assist most of the participants in their presentation of self. Some might choose to use one category for both “face image” and “homepage image” while others choose to combine two different categories. The interpretations of photographs, from a profile owner’s point of view, would contribute a deeper understanding of the mechanism of self-presentation through photographs within the context of online dating.

5.2 Self-Presentation

It was mentioned briefly in previous chapters that daters on Qruiser can present themselves through four different elements on a profile: textual presentation, menu-driven personal facts, photographs, and clubs that each represent certain topics, interests or opinions. Except menu-driven personal facts, the other categories allow daters to present any kind of information. This presentation is selected and edited by daters in order to present themselves, who they are, what their intentions of being on Qruiser are, what and who they are looking for, and so on. The self-presentation is constructed with a goal in mind. This goal could be to present anything as mentioned, while studying dating photographs would lead to a deeper understanding of how this goal is embedded as semiotic signs.

5.2.1 Intentional Incorporation of Semiotic Signs in Self-presentation

Applying Goffman’s dramaturgical rhetoric of self-presentation, from a macro level, the dating site Qruiser is a stage where performances take place, and the users are the actors. The performances are seen in that the users constantly use photographs and other textual cues to present or perform themselves. Furthermore, from a micro level, each dating photograph can be seen as a single stage, where the content of the photograph is in itself a performance. That is to say, in the two photographs, “face image” and “homepage image”, a user performs in two plays. Judging from the participant observation, sometimes these two plays are similar, but not identical. For example, 30 participants used self-portraits for both performances. A participant may use two different self-portraits that present him in two different sets of clothes and with different postures. Sometimes the two performances could be completely different. For instance, one participant used a picture of him in a suit at his work place for his “face
image”, and used a picture of him in a pair of briefs riding a horse for the “homepage image”. These different sets of clothes, work place, horse, and everything in the pictures are the social fronts for the plays of the two participants. In semiotic terminology, these social fronts are regarded as signifiers, which could correspond to certain signifieds.

For some participants, self-presentation through photographs incorporates semiotic signs, in which signifiers are associated with certain signifieds. When asked how they present themselves through photographs, a participant, Kenneth, stated:

**Kenneth**: The latest pictures [of him in female lingerie] I have up here are to show my feminine fetish when I meet with guys (...) I am here looking for the right guys to receive from [as being passive]. That is perhaps why the photos are mostly to show off the butt. It shows that I mainly passive, and I will be happy to give oral sex and be passive in anal sex.

From Kenneth’s account, one can analyse that both women’s lingerie and his buttocks are two main signifiers in his dating photographs. The signifier of him wearing women’s lingerie connotes his fetishism in being feminine, and the buttocks signify his sexual role as being “bottom”, which is the receptive partner during sexual penetration (especially between two males). From his account, one can associate his self-presentation with Barthes’ “message with code” and Hall’s “encoding process”. The intention to look for “the right guys to receive from” was a message with code that was embedded in the signifier “buttocks”. The message contained a code because the photograph of his buttocks was merely an analogical representation, and to be able to encode such message in the corresponding signifier required a process of association, which involved consideration of the relation between buttocks and being bottom in sexual penetration. Additionally, Kenneth’s feminine fetishism was encoded into women’s lingerie. The encoding process was completed through associating that lingerie although originally designed for women, was worn by a male. It seems rather common that on Qruiser daters would focus more on the personal front by trying to present themselves through the clothes they wear in the photographs. Another participant, Carlos, interpreted his self-presentation through signifiers by focusing on his garments (note: discourses in “[ ]” were inserted by the author, and those in “( )” were original from the interviewee).

**Carlos**: The small picture [the “face image”] from vacation (which admittedly only I know), with an Adidas sweatshirt (sport and leisure—I thought that my “look” [in the
picture] felt like me. That is to say, it is only the “I” that I myself know, but none of my profile viewers. [...] The black shirt and chinos are business and everyday life. That is to say, I want to have contact with guys who think that a good job, aplomb and academic education are important.

Carlos associated the brand Adidas with sport and leisure, and a black shirt and chinos with business and everyday life. Through wearing them, his interest in sport and leisure as well as his enthusiasm for work were encoded into two different pictures. The code for this message is the knowledge of Adidas as being a sport-oriented brand, and the conventional idea of different clothes being worn on certain occasions.

The selection of photographs is incorporated with semiotic signs, and it is restricted and framed by the perception of the signifier and the relation with its signified. Both Kenneth’s knowledge upon women’s lingerie and Carlos’ on Adidas enable them to encode the message of feminine fetishism and interest in sports into the photographs. These two sets of discursive knowledge were framed by the widely accepted social perception that lingerie should be worn by women and Adidas mostly produces goods used for sport and leisure. The selection of photographs for self-presentation involves a process of consideration and confirmation of relation between signifiers and signifieds.

The incorporation of semiotic signs becomes much clearer when it comes to self-presentation through pictures of objects. Louis, the owner of the picture of a dragon in Figure 8, expressed his knowledge of dragons and associated himself with the object while explaining why he chose that picture for his self-presentation.

**Louis:** The fact is that I am not that much like a dragon, but it seems so when I get furious. In connection with a conflict at work a number of years ago, I was called to the supervisors, who knew among themselves very well why I got irritated at this annoying guy [someone else] but wanted to cool down the situation. And when I pointed out that I had not said anything, he replied, “but you breathe fire”. Another thing with the dragon was that it was made of empty cans, as a way to remind us there weren’t (and still are not) any recycle systems for cans in France.

Louis’ understanding of a dragon was that it was a furious species that breathed fire. His process of self-presentation can be potentially broken down into two steps. First, his anger
and characteristic that he emitted a sense of anger even if he was not saying anything was rhetorically associated with an imaginary dragon being outrageous and breathing fire. Second, this characteristic was generalised to every dragon and then encoded into this specific dragon in the picture (Figure 8). This two-step encoding process explained Louis’ presentation of being like a fire breathing dragon when he’s angry, through a picture of a dragon that was made of empty cans and did not seem angry, nor did it breath fire. In addition, he did not choose any other dragons, but only this specific dragon that was made of empty cans. By doing so, the picture was encoded with his care for environmental protection into this meaningful dragon that raised the attention that there was/is no recycling system for cans in France. This example of using a picture of an object for self-presentation has shown that selection of the photograph involves a discursive process of figuratively associating a personal trait with another object that has similar quality or characteristic, which is then represented as a specific signifier in a photograph. The object is an embodiment of the particular personal trait. This process of message encoding indicates an underlying association of semiotic signs in dating photographs for self-presentation.

5.2.2 Unintentional Incorporation of Semiotics Signs in Self-presentation

The selection of pictures of objects for self-presentation might not always be restricted and framed by the understanding of semiotic signs. Some interviews with participants showed that when the participants selected photographs for their self-presentation, it was rather common that they did not try to consider and relate semiotic signs in the photographs that might indirectly present them. In other words, some online daters do not attempt to transmit meaningful messages through dating photographs, unlike an advertisement photograph in which the producer would carefully arrange every detail and setting in a photograph in order to communicate an implied message, or in Barthes’ terminology, “a message with code” (Barthes 1977b; Barthes 1977a).

**Author:** Could you please tell me why you use the space picture [a close-up of a star] in your profile? What is it that you want to suggest through the picture?

**Tommy:** Yes, that one. No, I only thought that it was a beautiful picture. It should not symbolise anything. Honestly speaking, I did not even know what it was until one member pointed out that it was a dying star.
A picture of an object used in presentation for online dating does not necessarily serve a specific purpose as in the case of the dragon picture. Tommy did not choose a space picture for his self-presentation in order to suggest that he might have a certain interest and knowledge in astronomy. Instead, it was chosen because it was “beautiful” as merely an analogical representation of an object, since he did not know what it was. His account indicates that his knowledge of the picture was limited on the “message without code” – the denotation – that it is an object that looked beautiful. There was no message encoded into the signifier “star”.

Neglecting to impose a secondary meaning, a message with code, into a dating photograph not only appears in the category of pictures of objects, but also, in some cases, in self-portrait pictures. When some participants were asked to explain why they had chosen their self-portraits for the presentation, the answers commonly focused on the “message without code”—how they appeared in the photographs.

**Simon:** The two pictures I use on my page are two pictures that I am satisfied with myself. Actually I hate taking pictures of myself and I am not particularly photogenic. Although I think these pictures show very well who I am and how I look.

From this account, one can analyse that the signifiers in his pictures are the two-dimension analogical representations of the physical Simon, and the signified is “Simon” himself. This signified is a denotation, a message without code. The comment “I am satisfied with myself” implies his focused on the denotation, but not the connotation of this signifier, which might suggest how he is as a person or his personality. Simon’s account showed that during the process of photograph selection, association of signifiers with its connotations in photographs is not necessarily essential, but rather stays on the denotation level.

Due to the concentration on the denotation, dating photographs do not necessarily present daters’ inner character. They do not always reflect how a person is, as Simon argued.

**Simon:** I know from experience that a picture seldom reflects how a person is. For example, I have as well a little prejudice against people who put out very intimate photo and sometimes purely naked pictures. But I know a couple of them who have done/are doing this, and they are exactly like any other human being and have become some of my better friends.
How a dater presents himself with his personal front – appearance in particular – is not necessarily consistent with how he actually is as a person, his personal traits, where traits can be embodied as a pattern of behaviour or manner (Kassin 2003). As Goffman mentioned, one often expects a consistency between appearance and manner; however they may tend to contradict one another (Goffman 1959). Nevertheless, this inconsistency or misunderstanding is more likely to appear during the process of impression formation, which will be discussed in a later section.

5.2.3 Selective Self-presentation with Semiotic Signs

In addition to the incorporation of semiotic signs from the in-depth interviews, participants revealed selectivity in self-presentation.

_Kenneth:_ In the beginning, I even had photographs of [my] penis posted, but have come to the conclusion that I want to “save” a little of that information. That’s why most of the photos are of the butt and/or the body, to maintain some kind of style. [...]  

_Author:_ Why don’t you put out pictures of your face?  

_Kenneth:_ Anonymity only when I am not single.

The selective self-presentation is embodied mainly during the selection process of photographs. In CMC where there is a lack of one’s physical being and synchronicity makes it possible for online dater to control what to present and what to “save”. To control what and which photographs to present is to manage the conveyed impression. As a form of selective self-presentation, Kenneth controlled his presentation through taking away the pictures that contained a signifier, his penis, so as to “maintain some kind of style”. The style was the specific aspect of him that he intended to transmit in his self-presentation. The maintenance of style indicated the intention to control what was being transmitted through his photographs. What Kenneth intended to express was that he was a bottom who at the same time had a fetish for women’s lingerie, the motivation of expressing such impression led to his selective presentation of only photos of his buttocks and him in lingerie, instead of revealing all information such as his appearance or his daily life outside of Qruiser. In order to further explain the underlying incorporation of signifiers in self-presentation as well as being selective in self-presentation, the study target shifts from the participants to the researcher himself.
5.2.4 Personal Narrative

To better understand how gay online daters present themselves through photographs, I used reflections on my personal experience in self-presentation as a homosexual dater. In this study, I practiced self-presentation in the context of online dating through choosing seven photographs in total, five of which were presented in Section 5.1 and the other two are presented in this section (Figures 10 and 11). This narrative mainly focuses on the thoughts that occurred during the selection process of these seven photographs.

_I don’t look that good recently. There are a lot of pimples on my face. Instead of taking new ones, I will just use some old pictures where I have smooth skin and look good._ – Author

I was already being selective in the very beginning of the self-presentation. I did not want to show other daters pictures where I was a gay guy with acne, which was, to me, not very attractive. My thought about the signifiers “pimples” was that they were unattractive and

![Figure 10. A daily picture of the author with ice cream](image1)

![Figure 11. A self-portrait of the author (shirtless) by the sea](image2)
undesirable, and they would largely affect how other people thought about me. In this moment of selection, it was the denotation that I focused on – how the pimples appear, and how I look with them. At the same time, I took into consideration how other gay daters would perceive me. A connotation of “pimples” could be “uncleaness”, which could lead other gay daters to consider me to be a guy who does not care about hygiene. It was a selective self-presentation, where in reality I had pimples on my face, while I chose to use old pictures where I had a clear complexion. This selection was a process of self-enhancing that led to the result that I perceived myself in the photographs to be more appealing to others.

Self-enhancing is a way of being selective in self-presentation. For example:

“I look nice in the picture. My skin looks perfect in the picture, even under the sunlight. And it doesn’t show the scar on my chest.” – Author

This was a thought I had when I chose the self-portrait of my being shirtless by the lake (Figure 5) and the one by the sea (Figure 11). As a matter of fact, I do not normally take pictures when I am shirtless, since I am ashamed about a scar that sits right in the middle of my chest. Choosing two photographs was a way of presenting myself selectively, as I could show my upper body without necessarily exposing the scar. The selectivity is enabled by the lack of cues in CMC, since if I were to be shirtless in front of others in real life, even though there are ways to cover the scar, it would be more obvious for others to notice that there is something I am hiding.

In the selection of photographs for self-presentation, not all signifiers are equally important. When I chose Figure 11, I focused primarily on the personal front, how I appeared in the picture, without considering the setting, the fact that I was actually lying by the sea. During the selection of photographs for self-presentation, certain signifiers are more significant than others. In this case, the personal front or the analogical representation of me was the centre of my consideration rather than the sea setting. The personal front denoted me being what I considered to be attractive, which I thought to be more appealing and important in online dating. This led me to overlook the setting in the picture during the selection.

A “message without code” might be more focused on than a “message with code” when choosing photographs for online dating. The selection of Figure 11 shows a focus on denotation rather than the connotation. The connotation of the sea could be nature; and the
connotator – the combination of the shirtless me and the sea could lead to a secondary meaning or a coded message such as “I like being in nature” or “I like swimming” (as the picture doesn’t show me actually swimming). However, this message with code was not taken into consideration during the selection of this photograph; the message was not even intentionally encoded in the photograph. When I chose Figure 10, I was focused on the personal front. I selected this picture because I was satisfied with how I looked in a shirt that I like. It was primarily the appearance I was concerned about. But I might have encoded a message that I cared about how I dressed, because my personal preference of wearing shirts might have unwittingly influenced my choice of photograph.

However, the appearance was not always the focus. When I selected the B&W picture in Figure 9 I was thinking that I looked nice in the picture, and the smile looked natural. However, I also considered that the background was blurry; the B&W effect made the picture look odd; my position in the picture was not right in the middle, which could be unconventional; and that the combination of factors made the picture look artistic. Thinking that a picture is artistic is different from thinking that I look nice in the picture. It involves a process of consideration for semiotics signs other than the analogue self. It was not only the appearance that was important, but also other visual cues such as depth of field, colour tone and position. Through the process of considering the interrelation among settings and personal fronts, the message with the code “artistic” was conveyed and encoded into these signifiers.

5.2.5 Summary

How one appears in a picture is usually what daters focus on when choosing photographs for their dating profiles. It is the “message without code” that is important. However, in some cases, daters would also consider the connotation of signifiers other than the denotation; such as Kenneth with pictures of him in lingerie and showing his buttocks and Louis with the photograph of a dragon sculpture.

Self-presentation through photographs of an online dater or photographs of objects could be both intentionally and unintentionally incorporated with semiotic signs. On the one hand, it is intentional that signifiers contain meanings that are designed and encoded by the online dater. He anticipates a photograph would imply a message. It is an incorporation of semiotic signs that both signifiers and connotation. On the other hand, it is unintentional; regardless what
meanings a photograph might contain, it is merely the denotation, analogical representation of the “self” or an object that an online dater intends to present. This self-presentation incorporates with signifiers but not semiotics signs, because the connotation corresponding to the signifiers does not interfere with the selection process of photographs.

In addition, a picture of an object might fail in serving as self-presentation when semiotic signs are unintentionally incorporated. Such picture is content-wise not related to its owner. There is no message with code in the picture when there is no intentional incorporation of semiotic signs. The picture does not involve any discursive information about the owner. No self-presenting information is transmitted through such a photograph. Such photographs exist in self-presentation on Qruiser; however, rather than assisting the presentation of an online dater, it is a mere “decoration” in the dating profile.

One interesting point about dating photographs is that participants not only expect photographs to be self-presenting, but also to be functioning as a filter for daters with whom they will potentially connect. Kenneth’s pictures of him in lingerie and showing his buttocks would potentially attract daters who were into women’s lingerie or into someone who liked lingerie, as well as those who were interested in being a “top” roll in sexual intercourse while Kenneth was the “bottom”. The filter function was implied by Carlos in the following statement:

Carlos: Of course I want guys to think such thing is important if we have contact [...] I show what I like, which probably attracts those who enjoy the same things, sport and leisure as well as business and everyday life.

This filtering process primary involves taking into consideration how another online dater would perceive one’s photographs, and what/how impression is formed from the photographs. The function of photographs as a filter would then lead the discussion of dating photographs from the profile owners’ perspective to that of the profile viewer.

5.3 Impression Formation

It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. As a hypothesis about localization of function, the statement is not quite right – the brain and not the eye is surely the most important organ involved [...] Whether it is beautiful or ugly or just conveniently at
hand, the world of experience is produced by the man who experiences it (Neisser 1967, 3).

From a profile viewer’s aspect, photographs are viewed as cues to assist formation of impression, or at least to assist in getting a basic idea of how other daters look. In this section, in addition to participants’ accounts from online interviews and group discussions, the analysis also focuses on the author’s personal experience of forming an impression during the participant observation. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, this observation was not about observing participants’ behaviour in forming impressions through photographs, but the observation of participants’ self-presentation through photographs; this is simultaneously the author’s personal experience of establishing an impression via dating photographs. Compared to self-presentation through photographs where underlying meanings could sometimes be unintentional, impressions from a photograph are always affected by the signifiers that are embedded in the photograph, even though it is merely, as some interviewees said, “feeling that I get from the picture”. Impressions are formed in the human brain from processing information, the signifieds, which are obtained through the vision of signifiers.

5.3.1 Arbitrariness of Impression Formation

Forming an impression is an arbitrary process, and the impression from a photograph varies from person to person. In the online interviews, the participants were asked to account for the impression they established about the author through photographs that were shown on his profile. Viewing the same set of photographs (Figures 10 and 11), two rather diverse impressions were received from two interviewees.

**Brendan:** The picture of you eating ice cream: happy, nice, stand-up guy [helyllekille]. The picture on the cliff: mischievous, joy in the eyes, like to swim... My total impression is that you are a happy and nice guy with tongue-in-cheek [med glimten i ögat] [...] It’s a likeable impression, no beer glass in the hand [Figure 8]. I do not interpret the upper body [shirtless] as a sex invitation. It will become more [sex invitation] when one shows off their hidden talents. A naked picture of below the navel signals sex; likewise, when one shows the body/penis but no head.

The other impression was from Dominic who stated the opposite:
**Dominic:** I am thinking (and get turned on) mostly on the big picture [Figure 11]. You are really cute and charming. [...] Seeing you lying on the beach with your nice and inviting smile, at the same time one divines and starts to imagine violently – mmmm lol. I get as horny as can be. The smaller picture is more just (a) ‘portrait’: a little anonymous, without sending specials signals to the genitals – hehe. Probably the ice cream, if one is to be overly Freudian. [...] The ice cream is more like a little joke – but like something to lick – with the absence of more real things.

On the one side, Brendan’s impression implies a focus on the connotation of signifiers. The inner characteristics “happy”, “nice”, and “mischievous” were not literally written on the photographs; instead these characteristics were extracted through the observation of signifiers such as the smile and the gaze. However, he did not specify which signifiers led him to such an impression even thought he was asked to do so. It is possible to consider that he established the impression through a combination of several signifiers in the photographs, as no other cues existed, such as hearing or touch during the interview, without having specific knowledge in semiotics that could assist him in critically interpreting the photographs.

Dominic more or less focused on the denotation, the appearance. “Cute and charming” are personal perceptions of the personal fronts (eyes, nose, smile, facial expression, and so on) rather than the meanings that the personal fronts might evoke such as personality type. However, from the connotator, the author hold the ice cream close to his mouth, (Figure 10) Dominic extracted a message with code that the author would lick a “real thing”, an analogical substitution of “ice cream”, in a sexual manner. For Dominic, a connotation of a sexual suggestion was signified from this combination of signifiers. That is to say, impression formation could involve a process of an analogical association and imaginary substitution of a signifier with a non-existent object.

Furthermore, there is one distinct difference between Brendan’s impression and Dominic’s. For Brendan, the author being shirtless and lying on the beach was not seen as being a sexual invitation; however, the very same combination of signifiers led Dominic to a “violent” sexual imagination. This shows arbitrariness between signifieds and signifiers. This is largely due to the differences in knowledge, experience, and any personal perception between observers, as well as the context under which impression is formed. Dominic further stated:
**Dominic:** Certainly it is important to ask: WHO is the observer? And I am somewhat a very soft and romantic person, who has a greater need for intimacy, tenderness, affection – than just for pure sex. I get turned on by you, for at least you seem to be a soft and beautiful guy on the picture. [...] I imagine that it is also a very big difference on WHERE a picture is published. If I saw your beach picture [Figure 9] on a tourist brochure of Vingresor [a travel agency] I would have probably appreciated it, or perhaps even had dirty fantasies in my little brain. But when it appears here on Qruiser, this dating site, then signals will obviously move down to the genital in a completely different way.

Firstly, the difference in the impressions made by Brendan and Dominic were due to the asymmetric position between them. In addition to what has been mentioned: knowledge, culture, and history, this asymmetric position might also involve the differences in their needs, goals for being on Qruiser, and so on. Dominic’s affection toward the author was possibly one of the main reasons that had led his impression toward a sexual dimension. Secondly, the social context influences observer’s perceptions of the individual in a photograph. A brochure of a travel agency and a dating site are two different social contexts with different goals, since, with the same photograph, the agency focuses on the travel plan that is being promoted, while in a dating site it focuses on promotion of self. The understanding or connotation of the signifier was affected by the context, as Dominic indicated, “However, the ice cream I could probably roughly see as a kind of ‘marker’ – but only because it was on a gay site, and the gay world’s eternal penchant for phallus symbols (‘fallossymboler’).” Signifiers in a photograph were considered as “markers”, which, according to Dominic, could lead one’s perception of a photograph in a certain direction.

When the questions “who” and “where” arise, the combination of both affects the understanding of semiotics signs, which lead to an arbitrariness in forming impression. The social context of a dating site frames the mindset of its users, which provides a user foundation for his impression formation. Nevertheless, the effect of this mindset on impression formation is not the research aim of this study; in addition, it would be difficult to counteract this effect on the analysis of the participants’ accounts in their establishment of impression through photographs.
5.3.2 Central Signifier and Peripheral Signifier

Even in the same context, the priorities of signifiers in a photograph are different. That is, not every signifier receives equal attention when the picture is presented on a dating site where activities are more interpersonal.

*Author:* [...] but the use of a black and white picture, and that I was by a lake, don’t they also say something about me, or what do you think?

*Kevin:* Just looked at your pictures again. Not until now did I realise that it was a black and white picture and a picture with water in the background...

When Kevin was asked to form an impression about the author through Figures 5 and 9, his impression implied that he focused on only one signifier – the analogical representation of the author. The signifiers “black and white” and “lake” were not noticed until attention was brought to them. That is to say, when some online daters observe and try to form impression of the individual in a photograph, they filter out signifiers, information that is not essential to their judgement. This was explained by Asch (1946, 270) as “a process of discrimination between central and peripheral traits. All traits do not have the same rank and value in the final impression”. The peripheral traits are applied to the signifiers “black and white” and “lake” in this context. The existence of central and peripheral signifiers in impression formation was further proven when Figure 11 was brought up in the group discussion, where Philip focused more on the appearance of social front – the author was shirtless – and James paid more attention to the manner of social front – the facial expression.

*Philip:* I feel it’s a bit sexual; it’s like you cannot see if you are all nude or not.

*James:* I sort of feel like a bit unnatural picture; I don’t really understand it. I don’t understand what he’s trying to tell with his face. Like a special look and I can’t really understand what he’s trying... Are you [author] trying to be happy, curious, tired; I can’t really read the emotion. Can you [looking at Philip]? What’s his emotion on his picture?

*Philip:* I read it in a different way. He wants to show his body, so he took a selfie for the profile. There is a reason why you cannot see the rest; he wants to show a little bit but not too much. I don’t put much analysis on his smile.
However, signifiers can transform from peripheral to central. From the same signifier “lake” together with “sunlight” in Figure 5 that were overlooked by Kevin, another participant, Mike, decoded a message that “you look like you enjoy having fun (‘by a lake in the warm summer’)”. First, “warm summer” was itself a signified/connotation/message with code. It was a connotation because there is no direct signifier stating that it is “warm summer”; instead, it was decoded from associating with a combination of signifiers – sunlight, shirtless, lake. Second, “warm summer” was at the same time a signifier, associated with “lake”; together they affected Mike’s decoding of the message “you enjoy having fun” from the photographs.

Although signifiers are discrete, participants attempted to form a rounded impression of the person through combining several signifiers, making associations and connections with the connotation. The same signifier may be peripheral for some daters, but it could become central for others.

5.3.3 No Impression?

Online daters can make an impression through dating photographs, regardless if it focuses on the appearance (first level meaning) or personality (secondary meaning). Impressions can be formed through making reference, as when Brendan explained why he had made his impression, he mentioned, “It is based on all the people I have met through all these years”. Nevertheless, not all the participants formed an impression of daters’ personalities by judging from their photographs.

**Ryan:** Yes. 1) You look good. 2) Like your eyes. 3) You are thin. [Figure 3 and 7]

**Author:** Okay. What impression do you have about my personality then? Is there something about my personality that you can see from the pictures?

**Ryan:** Personality, then one should probably meet the other to get to know that.

Instead of seeing photographs as a foundation for forming an impression about one’s personality, some participants regard photographs as merely giving a basic idea of how the other looks, and as a determinant for whether or not to initiate contact. This correspond to the result from the previous study that a photograph is a strong predictor of a first impression of attractiveness and the online dater’s decision to initiate contact with the other dater (Taylor et al. 2010). They did not consider that photographs could present how a person was, and
believed that one should not have prejudice against a person according to how he appeared in photographs.

Participants’ attitudes toward dating photographs are ambiguous. For instance, some considered those who had sexually explicit pictures as having a lack of personality and interest, while others suggested that one should not be biased just because the others present sexually explicit photographs. In order to further understand how impressions are formed in association with semiotic signs, and whether it is always possible to extract daters’ personalities based on their dating photographs, the discussion will move from analysis of participants’ accounts to that of author’s personal experience.

5.3.4 Personal Narrative

In this section, I reflect on my personal experience to gain a deeper insight into formation of impressions about others through their dating photographs. In this study, I practiced impression formation in the context of online dating by observing 387 photographs of the participants. The narrative mainly focuses on the thoughts that occurred during the formation process, and the impressions that were established from analysing signifiers in those photographs. There are in total 5990 words of my written impressions of the 200 online daters, averaging around 30 words per impression.

A photograph has an independent context, and, as a result, similar signifiers in different photographs give diverse impressions. The context involves a mutual relation between one signifier and others. To clarify, I refer to the thought I had when I was observing two different photographs of two participants:

One participant’s riding a horse gives a sense of dominance and masculinity, while another participant’s standing next to a horse gives a sense of equality, and easier to get close to. – Author

One participant sat on a horse in his underwear, and the other participant was fully dressed and standing next to a horse with the rein in his hand. In respect to the impression, in the picture in which the participant was sitting straight and wearing only a pair of briefs, I formed an impression of dominance, masculinity, and that he liked to keep matters under control. While from the other picture, where the other participant was fully dressed standing next to a horse, I got an impression that he had a nice personality, was easy going, and would not try to
show that he is in anyway superior to others. The differences in the impressions were mainly due to the two positions between the participants and the horses, as well as the different degrees of nudity. It was not from a single signifier “horse” that I decoded the message or the impression, but from its connection with the entire context.

The combination and mutual relations of central and peripheral signifiers constituted the contexts of the two photographs. The central signifiers were the analogical representation of the participants, the horse and nudity. Peripheral signifiers such as background were not essential to my formation of impression. However, it is possible that it influenced my judgement without my actually realising it.

A central signifier in one photograph can shift to peripheral in another photograph. For example, using the same picture where the participant sat on the horse in his underwear, one could also form an impression that the participant was an exhibitionist. The message with code “exhibitionist” can be decoded by focusing on the signifier that the participant had only a pair of underwear and the signifier “outdoors”. In this case, the signifier “outdoors”, which was peripheral in previous impression, would then become the central signifier. The shift from central signifier to peripheral signifier can be further explained using the following two impressions.

*He is an optimistic person (smile with teeth).*

*Although he is smiling with teeth, he doesn’t show a very outgoing personality (not looking straight into the camera). – Author*

The signifier “smile with teeth” was seen in both photographs of different participants. In the picture with the impression, “smile with teeth” was a central signifier that dominantly led to an impression that the participant was an optimistic person. In the picture of the other participant, the same signifier was presented; however, the signifier was shifted from central to peripheral, with the presence of another signifier, the gaze of the participant. In addition, the “smile with teeth” impression also showed that a central signifier could lead an impression toward a certain direction, which corresponds to Asch’s (1946) statement that a central trait would influence the interpretation of the peripheral traits. The second impression implies that the signifiers are interrelated and collectively influence the formation of impression. All in all, these were only my personal impressions of the participants.
It is possible that I am totally subjective and biased about semiotics and impression formation, and insist that one can decode impressions from observing dating photographs.

*He is not very confident in his look (as the one [face image] with sunglasses and hat, and the other [homepage image] from a long distance, can’t see the face clearly). He’s one of those who are shy at the beginning, but even when he passes the stranger stage, he can be happy but not crazy (smile with teeth, the craziness was decreased by the feelings of both pictures).* – Author

This is one sample of a complete impression I made about one participant. Some particular signifiers were associated with my knowledge and experience upon them so as to form the impression about the participant. However, these signifiers could be interpreted differently if read by someone who had different knowledge and experience.

The personal experience during the study showed that impressions formed from photographs did not necessarily reflect the person correctly.

*The information from only the profile and homepage pictures is limited, and some impressions correspond to their text description. However, when photos in the album are viewed, a completely different impression is made. I was shocked while viewing more photos, as they did not at all match the impression established from the other two pictures. I realised, for example, that judging pictures taken by another as socialised, could be misleading, as some pictures were in fact taken with a tripod.* – Author

When I tried to view more pictures of some participant, it was shocking to see how different a person could be from the impression I formed from the first two images. This indicates a limitation of information that two photographs can contain.

**5.3.5 Summary**

Impressions formed from two dating photographs might be a correct judgement about the participant, as the impression corresponds to information provided in the presentation text. Nonetheless, sometimes the face image and homepage image are misleading. Firstly, information contained in merely two photographs is limited, since in some cases during the experience, they did not reflect much about the participant’s inner character except how he
looked. Secondly, impressions formed from just two photographs could be biased, or even incorrect, as there are many external factors that could have influenced the production of the photographs. That was probably why some participants expressed that they chose not to judge other daters based on their photographs. Nevertheless, impressions change when more photographs are viewed, i.e. more information is provided for the formation of an impression.

The findings of participants’ perspective and the author’s personal experience indicate that impression formation largely connects with semiotics signs. First, there is an arbitrariness that lies between semiotic signs and impressions. A connotation, or message with code of a signifier varies from picture to picture, and from person to person, as it is largely influence by the appearance of other signifiers and knowledge and experience of viewers. Secondly, when forming an impression through dating photographs, there is a distinction of signifiers: central and peripheral, which are similar to Asch’s terminology of central traits and peripheral traits. In addition, the role of a central signifier is not constant across different surrounding signifier. Finally, impressions formed from dating photographs could be biased, or sometimes even incorrect.

The interviews with participants, which involved the discussion of forming impressions of the author, revealed some unexpected impressions. That is, the impressions formed by some participants were not what the author anticipated for certain photographs. One should then consider the likelihood of misunderstanding in the context of online dating.

5.4 Misunderstanding in Dating Photographs

The discussion of self-presentation and impression formation through dating photographs was conducted from the aspect of profile owners and profile viewers separately, while a discussion of misunderstanding joined them together. Three possible causes for misunderstanding arising from dating photographs can be concluded. One is that some online daters do not intentionally encode any message into their photographs. The other cause is the possibility that what an online dater reads from a photograph does not correspond to the message that was intended, which is an inconsistency between the two “messages with code”. Finally, old pictures are sometimes used due to the lack of synchronicity of CMC.
5.4.1 Sorry, I didn’t mean to.

One possible cause for misunderstanding is that from a profile owner’s point of view, the incorporation of semiotic signs is unintentional. Not every dating photograph is chosen for a special reason, as companies do in their advertising photographs. In other words, they do not choose to use certain pictures that contain signifiers, which are intentionally arranged, in order to transmit a specific message to those who view their profiles. For this reason, a dating photograph does not carry encoded messages.

An unintentional incorporation of semiotic signs in a photograph could cause misunderstanding for daters who try to decode a message from the photograph, and assume that the message is what the owner of the photograph is trying to imply. For example, in the space picture, the picture of object of Tommy, he did not have any knowledge about the content of the picture. He did not even realise what the content was until another dater pointed out that it was a dying star. He used it for his “homepage image” only for the reason that “I just think that it was a beautiful picture”. However, for those who view his profile and see the picture, it is possible that they would assume that Tommy has an interest in space, or that he has a profound knowledge of astronomy. This misunderstanding is caused by unintentional incorporation of semiotic signs for self-presentation. This discussion focuses on misunderstanding that arises from the selection process.

However, some misunderstanding was actually due to the misleading signifiers in photographs. Mike, one interviewee, pointed out that his photographs did not accurately represent him.

*Mike:* For me it’s like a self-fulfilling prophecy. My photos have always looked posed, fake and stupid ever since I was a little schoolboy. So when somebody is taking my picture I know it will look posed, fake and stupid. I am unhappy with the process and so the photo ends up looking posed, fake and stupid. [...] People will get a wrong impression looking at my photos. My former boyfriend told me he misses my broad smile and deep laugh because it is so honest. It used to make him laugh along, and he misses that. Can you see that about me in my photos? I doubt it.

Mike’s account implied that misunderstanding is not because of the intention of the photograph, but because of the misrepresentation of semiotic signs. A portrait might be an
analogical representation of the physical self; but for those who are uncomfortable in front of cameras, a picture might not be the ideal way to present oneself, but to merely give a basic idea of how one looks. It was suggested that Mike incorporate semiotic signs in self-presentation, but he is too self-conscious about the misleading signifiers in his photographs, which would lead to a misunderstanding of impression.

5.4.2 Sorry, that’s what I thought.

The other possible cause for misunderstanding is that from both the profile owner and viewers’ points of view, there are various ways to interpret a photograph. That is to say, the encoding and decoding process of connotations of signifiers is subjective. It is subjective in the sense that every dater has his own knowledge, culture, experience, to which a profile viewer refers during the process of message encoding and decoding.

For instance, there was a misunderstanding from the photograph in Figure 10, where the author was holding the ice cream. The only thought about that picture was that it might imply my preference for clothes. I did not consider that the picture would in anyway give out a sense of sensuality. However, from the same photograph, Dominic decoded the signifier “ice cream” as “phallus”, which led him to a sexually-oriented impression. That is, a message was decoded, but it contradicted the message that was originally intended. Whereas Dominic positioned himself as being fond of young gay men, the author placed himself as a gay man who was concerned with fashion. The asymmetric position in the coding processes led to an inconsistency between two messages.

In addiction, from my personal experience, misunderstandings can be caused by the lack of information in a photograph. Such misunderstandings were also discovered during the observation and impression formation through viewing the two photographs of each participant. The impression sometimes became completely different as more pictures of the same participant were observed. When I formed impression about others, I made reference to my previous experience with people. Subjective reference to personal experience and lack of information could cause impression to be biased or even wrong.

5.4.3 Out-dated photographs

The last possible cause for misunderstanding that is found during the study is due to the use of out-dated dating photographs.
James: I met a person once. I think it was quite, you know, quite fast. We didn’t talk very long before we decided to meet. And then he had like a, this picture of himself where he played hockey, much younger, and was really well fit. And since then the years had gone by, and he had gained quite a lot of weight, and he didn’t really tell me about it, it was such a big difference meeting him in real life from what it was in the pictures.

Author: Do you have some similar experience?

Nick: Yes, I do. This one (James) only had pictures of himself in an alternative style – emo style, cool hair, and cool clothes. I met him and he didn’t any more.

James: Yes, that was all in the past.

Author: So was it a good difference or bad difference?

Nick: Let’s say it was a bad difference, but not bad enough, apparently, since I asked him to marry me.

Due to the lack of synchronicity and visible cues in CMC, and the fact that Qruiser does not have a specific requirement for how new the photographs should be, online daters can present photographs regardless of the age of the photos. The physical appearance in a photograph is fixed to the time when it was taken. However, the physical self experiences changes as time goes by. The changes might be insignificant sometimes, but can also be momentous. For those who have experienced momentous changes in physical appearance, an out-dated photograph could only be a perfect analogical representation of the appearance in that particular time the photograph is taken, but might be misleading if it is used for the time when the changes have taken place.

Such misunderstandings are not caused by the asymmetric position of the encoding and decoding processes. Rather the personal front that was put on for the performance is misleading for the time being. It would not have been a misunderstanding if the pictures were viewed around the time they were taken. From the audience’s perspective, the misunderstanding does not arise from wrongly decoding the message from the signifiers that are contained in the photographs. Instead, it arises from the potential discrepancy between the impression formed from the out-dated photographs and that from an “up-to-date” physical appearance. However, Nick expressed that the “bad” discrepancy did not lead to a lack of
further interaction with James, which leads to the consideration of whether misunderstanding arises from dating photographs matters.

### 5.4.4 Does it matter?

Some misunderstanding from dating photographs can exist during interpersonal activities of self-presentation and impression formation; however, it might be negligible in the context of online dating.

*Author:* For you it [space picture] means nothing, but perhaps others think that there is a message behind the picture. What do you think about that?

*Tommy:* They can think what they want about the picture, and about that I didn’t know what it was.

*Author:* Doesn’t it bother you if others misunderstand you?

*Tommy:* Not a bit.

*Author:* Why is that?

*Tommy:* Because it feels silly to stick on a picture and my ignorance of the picture.

There are misunderstandings arising from dating photographs; but it is negligible for the reason that Qruiser is not an online dating site that provides only communication through photographs, but also linguistic cues such as textual presentation and messages. The misunderstanding can be offset by further reading of personal text, as impressions change when more information is processed. Additionally, to many online daters, impression formation is not restricted to photographs but also includes textual information. However, personal text was not taken into consideration in the study for the reason that the research purpose was to examine the incorporation of semiotic signs in photographs when gay online daters present themselves and form impression of others.
6. Concluding Remarks

This study has examined gay online daters’ self-presentation and impression formation through photographs, and their incorporation of semiotic signs in the practices. Different from previous research, which examined the accuracy of photographs in self-presentation (Hancock and Toma 2009) and the role of photographs and other generated information in impression formation (Utz 2010), this study strived to gain a deeper understanding of dating photographs and the relation with semiotic signs through three aspects: self-presentation, impression formation, and misunderstanding in dating photographs. Three main research questions were developed according to these aspects. First, how do gay online daters incorporate semiotic signs in their choice of photographs? Second, how do gay viewers obtain information about profile owners from dating photographs? Finally, how does misunderstanding of impression arise from self-presentation and impression formation through dating photographs?

In addition, an introductory question was proposed: from a semiotic point of view, what are the main categories of photographs that gay online daters show in their profiles? The observation in the study showed that, based on settings and personal fronts, four categories could be proposed: self-portraits, daily pictures, travel pictures, and sexually explicit pictures. Two other categories, pictures of objects and B&W pictures, were also observed. Pictures of objects were distinct from the four categories because of the exclusion of the signifier of the online daters selves, whereas B&W pictures were separated and based on the semiotic signifier, colour. These categories classify most of the photographs that were used in self-presentation on Qruiser.

As far as the author is concerned, this is the first study among those that study photographs in self-presentation and impression formation that focuses on the incorporation of semiotic signs in these processes. The findings of the study suggest that self-presentation through photographs do sometimes incorporate with semiotic signs. To begin with, gay online daters choose photographs that contain signifiers that imply corresponding messages. Semiotic signs, including signifiers and connotations, are taken into consideration during the selection of photographs. However, some gay online daters incorporate semiotic signs only on the level of denotation. That is, in spite of what meanings a photograph might contain, it is merely the analogue of self or an object that an online dater wishes to present.
This study has revealed a distinction of signifiers in the process of impression formation. Signifiers can be divided into central and peripheral signifiers, which are similar to Asch’s (1946) terminology of central traits and peripheral traits. Online daters do not pay equal attention to every signifier while forming impressions from a photograph. Some signifiers are considered to be essential and lead to the main focus of impressions. In addition, as a result of different contexts in different photographs and various degrees of knowledge and experience from person to person, a signified or a message with a code of a signifier is not constant, but arbitrary instead. What’s more, due to the same reasons, in impression formation, the position of central signifier and peripheral signifier remains unsettled.

Furthermore, through analysis responses from the online interviews, the study accentuates three possible causes of the rise of misunderstanding from dating photographs. First, the study emphasises the unintentional incorporation of semiotic signs, not considering connotations in the selection process of photographs, could lead to a one-sided misunderstanding for profile viewers. Second, misunderstanding can arise from the collision between two messages with codes. That is, due to the asymmetric position, non-identical degrees of knowledge, culture, and experience among online daters, the processes of encoding and decoding are based on asymmetric mindsets, so that the messages with codes do not coincide. Finally, misunderstanding can arise from the use of out-dated photographs that do not accurately represent dater’s current physical appearance.

From the results, one important conclusion remark is made: It is likely that the incorporation of semiotic signs in photographs is weaker in the process of self-presentation than in the process of forming impressions. In the context of online dating, daters usually request pictures in order to have a basic idea about the appearance of the person they contact. In many cases they choose certain photographs just because they look good in the pictures, or “it represents how I look”. It is the message without code – appearance – that they focused on, rather than trying to imply a message with code. Nevertheless, there are still cases where dating photographs actually carry meanings that are intended by the daters. As far as the author is concerned, one main reason for the weak link between semiotic signs and self-presentation is that online dating photographs are not the same as advertising photographs. Whereas advertising photographs have limited space to maximise the presentation of a product, online dating photographs are accompanied with textual presentation and menu-driven personal facts. The presentation of self in online dating is not limited to a photograph, as it is for
advertising photographs. Other elements in the profile also serve as part of the self-presentation where supplemental information can be added.

Nevertheless, by focusing on the culture of gay online dating, the study has broadened the discussion of gay men’s use of the Internet for self-presentation and impression formation online. Whereas previous studies have seldom specifically looked into photographs, self-presentation and impression formation in gay online dating (Gosine 2007; Parsons et al. 2007), the study has investigated gay online daters’ incorporation of semiotic signs into the interpersonal activities of self-presentation and impression formation. In addition, among abundant studies in self-presentation and impression formation through photographs (Hancock and Toma 2009; Utz 2010), this study is among the first to relate the semiotics theory with the Goffman’s theory of self-presentation and Asch’s theory of impression formation. It applies a complex yet interrelated structure in the context of photographs in online dating, which makes it possible to study gay online dater’s incorporation of semiotic sign in the two processes.

6.1 Limitations and Future Studies

During the study, there were many positive voices concerning the methodology of online interviews. For daters who were not open about their appearance on Qruiser, online interviews granted them anonymity, which made them feel more comfortable and at ease to express their opinions. As online interviews were taken in a form of message conversation, participants were given sufficient time to “calmly answer the questions and think at the pace one needs”. However, there is a downside of the method, as a participant pointed out.

“To do interviews on Qruiser where respondents do not have the possibility to meet the thesis author comes an opposition that this will not be considered to be serious.”

Some participants, whose accounts were used in the study, indicated that they would prefer a face-to-face interview where participants are more likely to get to know the researcher and the study. In addition, during the study, the author realised another disadvantage of online interviewing – discontinuity. Some online interviews lasted as long as several days, since the participants logged out of the dating site during the interview, and continued the next time they logged in. Due to this gap, one participant forgot what he had had in mind previously.
However, it only happened once or twice, and it did not affect the validity of the collected data.

Furthermore, photographs are not merely a part of self-presentation, but are also a filter that controls with whom online daters have contact. Impressions formed from other’s self-presentations interfere with the decision whether one would contact the person or not. Pictures that show one’s interests would ideally attract those with the same interests, and in this way, photographs function as a filter for online daters. Nevertheless, despite all the importance of photographs in self-presentation and impression formation, it does not work alone in the context of online dating. Linguistic cues, such as textual representation and messages, are also essential in interpersonal activities in online dating. In addition, they are the reasons why misunderstandings in dating photographs are not essential issues in online dating, as textual representation and messages supplement information that are unforeseeable in dating photographs. Therefore, to study misunderstanding in the context of online dating, future studies could benefit from extending the material to both photographs and textual presentation.

Since this study only focused on gay men, it would be interesting to expand the study to lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, and queer, so as to compare if there are any discrepancies among different sexual orientations.

Given the growing presence of online dating in academia (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012; Saltes 2013; Tsunokai, McGrath, and Kavanagh 2013), as well as the participation of gay men in online dating (Gosine 2007; Nodin, Carballo-Diéguez, and Leal 2013), it is undeniable that there is a need for further research and investigation on gay men’s online management of impressions.
References


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Appendix

Appendix 1: Presentation Text in English

Hi Everyone:

I am a master student at Uppsala University. I am currently writing my master thesis in how homosexual guys present themselves and form impression about others through photographs.

The reason I am here is because I have been using Qruiser for a very long time, which makes it very interesting for me to write my thesis on.

So I am hoping that you will have some free time that you want to share with me and have an online interview here on Qruiser. Plus, there are many useful pictures here that I would like to use in my study, and if I do so I will contact you through personal message so as to ask for your permission to use the picture, just want to make sure I do it in the right way.

If you have reach this far and are still interested, feel free to send me a message, even if you are just curious about my study but have no intention in participating.

Thank you very much!

Best regards

/Kai
Appendix 2: Presentation Text in Swedish

Hej allihopa!

Jag studerar sista terminen på min masterutbildning vid Uppsala universitet. Just nu håller jag på att skriva min masteruppsats som handlar om hur homosexuella killar framhäver sig själva och skapar uppfattningar om andra genom deras bilder.

Anledningen till att jag valt just detta ämne är att jag personligen har använt Qruiser under en lång tid, därav mitt intresse för att göra min uppsats i ämnet.

Om du har tid över hoppas jag att vi kan ha en intervju här online på Qruiser. Det finns även många användbara bilder som jag skulle vilja använda i min studie. Om jag använder dem kommer jag kontakta dig i ett privat meddelande och be om ditt tillstånd att använda bilden. Detta för att allt ska gå rätt till.

Om du har fortsatt läsa så här långt och fortfarande är intresserad så får du gärna skicka ett meddelande till mig, även om du bara är nyfiken och inte planerar att delta i min studie.

Tack så mycket på förhand!

Med vänliga hälsningar

/Kai
Appendix 3: Consent Form

Consent Form

Research Project Title: Self-presentation and Impression Formation through photographs in an LGBT Online Dating Community.

This research is being conducted by a master student, Kai Fat Shum, from the department of Informatics and Media at the Uppsala University under the supervision of Dr. Jakob Svensson.

You are being asked to participate in a research. Please take your time and review the following items before making your decision:

• This group interview is a short meeting that a researcher will conduct with a small group of users of Qruiser to discuss self-presentation and impression formation through dating photographs.
• The interview should not take more than two hours to complete.
• The information you provide as a part of this interview process will be kept confidential within the group.
• The notes, audiotape and conversation will be used in the thesis, however real names will be replaced with pseudonyms so that your responses will not be identifiable.

Statement of Consent

I have read the consent form and understood the purpose of the focus group interview and the research study. I agree to participate in the interview. I understand that my personal information will be kept confidential.

Name:

Signature:

Date: