

Teens just wanna have fun? Adolescents' construction of desirability on SNS in Spain

La joventut només s'ho vol passar bé? La construcció de la desitjabilitat per part d'adolescents a les xarxes socials a Espanya

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ABSTRACT:

This paper presents a qualitative study on teens' self-representational strategies on social networking sites (SNS) in Spain, focusing on the gender bias in identity construction work. We looked at which representational strategies teenagers used in order to attract their peers and how they negotiated meanings of desirability. The research was conducted with 32 Spanish teenagers who participated in discussion groups and individual home interviews. Results show how participants used sexualization and playfulness as two intertwined strategies for negotiating their identities and managing relationships on Facebook and Tuenti. The participants constantly displayed themselves, testing their image on peers, even if this put their privacy and sexual reputation at risk. Findings also show that both boys and girls handled a (sexual) double standard when judging each other's displays.

KEYWORDS:

social networking sites, teenagers, sexualization, desirability, sexual double standard, playfulness.



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RESUM:

Aquest treball presenta un estudi qualitatiu sobre estratègies d'autorepresentació dels adolescents en les xarxes socials (SNS) a Espanya, i se centra especialment en els biaixos de gènere implícits en la construcció identitària. L'estudi analitza les estratègies d'atracció que utilitzen els adolescents i com negocien significats de desitjabilitat. A l'estudi, trenta-dos adolescents espanyols van participar en grups de discussió i entrevistes domiciliàries individuals. Els resultats mostren com els participants utilitzen la sexualització i el joc i l'humor a Facebook i Tuenti com a estratègies entrelaçades per negociar les seves identitats i gestionar la desitjabilitat. Els participants es mostren i s'exposen constantment als companys, encara que així puguin posar en risc la seva privacitat i reputació sexual. Així mateix, mostrarem com els adolescents manegen un doble estàndard (sexual) per a jutjar les imatges dels altres.

PARAULES CLAU:

xarxes socials, adolescents, sexualització, desitjabilitat, doble estàndard sexual, joc.

1. Introduction: teens, identity shaping and social networking sites

Previous research has confirmed that social networking sites (SNS) are widely adopted by teenagers and young people (see for example Boyd, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Tortajada & Araüna, 2014; Mascheroni & Ólafsson, 2014). According to a 2014 study, 100% of young people in Spain are connected to the Internet (Aranda, Sánchez & Tubella, 2014) and 80% of them are active on social networks (García, Alonso & Hoyo, 2013). But apart from these quantitative data, what is most interesting for our research is that social networks have become privileged places for the exploration and construction of identities (Boyd, 2008; Manago *et al.*, 2008; Stern, 2004; Tortajada, Araüna & Martínez, 2013; Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015). Young people in most industrialized societies now interact with each other in offline and online communities alike, switching from one to the other with ease. Ringrose and Eriksson (2011) have used the term “digitized identity” to refer to these intertwined online and offline identities. Understanding young people’s online interactions is essential to gaining insight in the construction of social identity in adolescence (Boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2008; Stern, 2008). Indeed, identity is a process that is constituted through interaction and through the interpretations that the participants make both about the situation and about one’s actions and those of others (Blumer, 1982).

By interacting with each other, people somehow put their identities at stake (Goffman, 1994). For Goffman, the Self is the kind of image that an individual wants others to have about him/her when he/she is on stage, according to the character he/she represents. In other words, the Self is a “dramatic effect” emerging from the represented scene. Performers tend to offer their audience an idealized impression that needs to fit the norms and rules by which they are judged. So performers are impression managers: they want to look good. Social situations can thus be defined as arenas of mutual monitoring (Goffman, 1979). We understand self-images of young people on SNS to be articulations of identity as a mutually established concept among connected peers. Adolescents are focused on identity formation and social life, and so they eagerly take up Internet tools that they find useful to contact and even to mix with people of their own age (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Social comparison (Manago *et al.*, 2008), the negotiation of one’s own status (Boyd, 2008) and the possibility of knowing what others think about us (Pempek, Yermolayeva & Calvert, 2009) are online functionalities that add to those that already existed offline regarding identity and presentation work. The idealized image exhibited to others is what is taken in eventually (Goffman, 1994) and, therefore, it is important that all artificial aspects of self-presentation be seen as natural and authentic. Authenticity (or, rather, what is perceived as authenticity) is a key element in surviving on the web (Dare-Edwards, 2014; Tolson, 2010): the ability to display oneself in public in a transparent and confident way becomes an

essential skill for young people (Genz, 2015). These (visual) self-representations thus help to build a “good impression” and to gain acceptance from others (Tortajada, Araüna & Martínez, 2013; Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015).

The construction of gender is especially crucial in the early stages of identity exploration and the themes of love, desirability and romance are therefore a central part of teens’ new media practices (Boyd, 2010). Goffman defined gender display as the capacity of both women and men to perform masculinity and femininity, which makes SNS a relevant locale for the study of sexuality and gender in relation to young people’s digital culture (Van Doorn, 2010). In this sense, research has shown that young people’s digitized construction of identity is heavily gender biased (Ringrose & Eriksson, 2011; Tortajada, Araüna & Martínez, 2013; Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015). On the one hand, there are differences in the kind of participation: younger boys generally participate more than younger girls, and older girls more than older boys (Boyd, 2008). As to the topics, girls focus their content more on relationships than boys (Boyd, 2008; Manago *et al.*, 2008). Gender differences in online self-representation probably intensify gender norms offline, increasing pressure for sexual objectification and social comparison online (Ringrose & Eriksson, 2011). Additionally, gender displays on social media are strongly connected to some of the post-feminist representation patterns that dominate mainstream media with regard to beauty and the body (Tortajada, Araüna & Martínez, 2013), and social networks tend to promote compliance with these standards of beauty and with a model of sexualization that sets the general norm for attractiveness and desirability (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015).

One of the main motivations for teenagers to widely participate in these online spaces and identities is the search for environments to share experiences and create situations of intimacy with friends. But in order to build relationships with a certain degree of intimacy, adolescents must disclose personal information (Livingstone, 2008). The concept of mediated intimacy (Gill, 2009) thus takes on a new dimension in SNS, as young people tend to progressively create contents on their own lives (Stern, 2008) and to express themselves publicly (Boyd, 2008). By default, the profile of an SNS user is public, as are the status updates, comments, and “likes” they receive. Ultimately, friendships and relationships are managed and performed publicly on SNS, for example on Facebook (Boyd, 2008). This condition of “public by default” implies that part of adolescents’ socialization may face changing conditions in which the public and the private are defined (Oolo & Siiback, 2013). Privacy is revisited: what matters now is not so much what is disclosed, even if it is an intimate experience, but to whom it is disclosed (Livingstone, 2008). Privacy is thus negotiated between visibility and openness of content on the one hand, and strategies of codifying messages or addressing them to a particular group on the other (Oolo & Siiback, 2013).

Intimacy is often connected to the concept of trying to be attractive. Previous studies have shown that young people use several tools in order to appear attractive

to each other: profile pages allow the users to show who they are and how they want others to see them (Stern, 2004), and to express idealized aspects of who they want to be (Manago *et al.*, 2008). Other important sites of the construction of desirability are the profile picture and status updates (Young, 2009): teenagers know that pictures are key tools for impression management, and they deliberately use them for identity display on social networking sites (Siiback, 2010). What teenagers reveal about themselves can help them to get social control, and they plan their self-exposure strategically in order to manage the impressions from others and to gain peer approval, thus envisaging desired social outcomes (Stern, 2004). Self-presentations will therefore respond to the normative expectations and the construction of socially desirable identities (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). When selecting photographs for their profiles and posts, adolescents thus participate in the definition of what is socially acceptable (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015). In this research we seek to gain insight in the gender biases of shaping identity on SNS.

2. Material and methods

In this study we focused on the experiences, perceptions and opinions of teenagers in their own terms, seeking to understand some of the dynamics that emerged from the content analysis. This paper consequently presents how teens talk about their performances on the Internet in their own words, and how these displays connect to their offline relationships and experiences. The 32 teens participated voluntarily and were recruited by the research team based on criteria of age (between 14 and 18 years old), gender balance (17 boys and 15 girls), geographical diversity (several regions and cities in Spain), and SNS use (have at least one account and access SNS daily).

Once informed consent had been obtained from the participants and their respective families and schools, the researchers carried out sixteen interviews and two mixed discussion groups after agreeing on the interview script and running a pilot test. Whenever conditions allowed for it, participants were asked to access their SNS while being interviewed in their homes, showing their networks of friends, explaining what they were doing and giving meaning to part of the contents and practices. The home interviews were conducted in several cities in Spain (Murcia, Salamanca, Lleida, Barcelona and Tarragona). The discussion groups took place in two secondary schools, one in Barcelona and one in Tarragona, with natural groups – participants from the same class – in methodological coherence with the fact that teens' online practices are often in keeping with their offline interactions with the same peers.

All the interviews and discussion groups were recorded and a briefed student transcribed them (full literal transcriptions). The data analysis was carried out by

two of the senior researchers according to the “hermeneutic circle” method (Schmidt, 2004), in which the guiding principle is the interchange between material and theoretical prior knowledge. After the first round of analyses of the transcripts, the two researchers established the common categories which emerged from the data and the theoretical framework, which were then compiled in a code book and applied to all the material once again by the rest of the team.

3. Results

People want to look good in the pic so that others think they are attractive; they have this image, an impression of you, and they think “this girl is good-looking and popular”. (female, 18)

In this section we present teens’ perceptions of impression management in practice. Results are linked according to the concepts of the theoretical framework (identity construction involving authenticity, popularity and desirability) and in participants’ own wordings, as the quote above illustrates. We will not specify if quotes are from interviews or from discussion groups, as there are no significant differences in results.

If we consider impression management as a performance of the Self in Goffmanian terms, we can see that pictures are crucial when active on SNS for the participants in this study. Facebook is currently still the most popular SNS among Spanish teenagers, as “it is cool and we can upload any number of pictures there”, according to them. Not surprisingly, the kind of pictures they upload is in line with pre-existing online practices:

It’s the latest trend now to stand in front of a mirror to make your profile pic – just you or your face alone. (male, 14)

But these young people do not only perform according to pre-established online practices... they also construct offline settings that fit into their online displays:

What you do now is say: “hey girls, let’s get together and make our Facebook profile pics”. (female, 14)

Controlling one’s projected image on SNS is inherently part of children’s discourses (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015) and has also been pointed out by the adolescents who participated in our investigation. The construction of an idealized Self has to do with the way in which we read the reactions of others (Goffman,

1994), peer culture (Livingstone, 2008) and the simultaneous need to stand out individually and obtain collective recognition (Bauman, 2017). Social media potentially allow for full-time access to our peers (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015). Nurturing this universe of relationships and contents is thus a task that requires time and involvement but, as we see, it is experienced by young people as part of a game with its own rules (posing in a certain way to look attractive) and its strategies (following a trend or “challenge”, getting together for selfies and collective pictures). Obtaining public recognition and social desirability through as many “likes” as possible becomes the goal that guides them.

3.1. “Natural” versus “contrived”

A self-reported trend among the girls from our sample is to organize collective photo sessions and put together some kind of portfolio, a picture bank from which to choose profile pics for all the SNS they are active in. Some of the girls admit that these pictures are “artificial”, created for the occasion to display a particular identity. They create their own definition of the situation by making a distinction between “natural” and “contrived” poses. In their view, pictures of parties, holidays, outdoor activities, etc. are the natural or spontaneous ones. However, what they want to show to others about themselves (for example mirror pictures) are the contrived or devised ones:

It should have both kinds of pictures: what we are, but also the contrived ones! (female, 16)

Most participants agree the majority of the pictures on social media are actually contrived:

(...) they pose – about 75 or 80 per cent of them are poses. (male, 14)

According to most boys in our sample, girls think more about the effect the picture will have before uploading it than boys do. For some of the respondents, by doing this girls “hide their real personality in order to appear more attractive” (male,14).

We could say that there is a tension regarding what is appropriate to share on SNS (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015), and boys and girls are aware that risking inappropriateness when manipulating pictures is a price to be paid for an idealized impression. They know that if they enter this identity game they will have to adapt to the rules and regulations by which they are being judged. Therefore, it is inevitable that “everything is contrived” (Goffman, 1994).

As a consequence, the general perception among interviewees is that no one really says what they think, that on social media people are not sincere but only write comments in order to look good.

They say “oh you look so hot in that picture”, for example, but then you realize that behind your back they are talking about you, they take your pictures and send them to other girls and they start criticizing you. (female, 17)

Most of our interviewees admit that on SNS the phrase “you look hot/pretty/beautiful” has completely lost its value, as it is used all the time. Each time a picture is uploaded, peers are expected to give positive feedback, and this has almost become a convention – a silent agreement of courtesy, a cultural code – thus containing little or no credibility.

This is just to make yourself look good; saying “you’re hot” is just to suck up to someone or because everybody does it. (female, 16)

Goffman affirmed that the “world is a big wedding” (1994) where people engage in constant social performance. In a way, social media perfectly embody this idea, as their permanent character (inability to delete) magnifies the idealization that occurs in offline social contexts. The participants of our research recognize the artifice of this netiquette, legitimizing it as a way of communicating and relating to each other. Young people are perfectly aware of this.

3.2. Managing desirability

Participants affirmed that girls often select the pictures in which they look hot, attractive, using clothes that suit them or show their cleavage. According to participants, boys do the same displaying a nude torso:

[When they want to attract girls], boys show their abdominal muscles, with no T-shirt on, shaved, in the bathroom mirror. (male, 16)

The boys upload six-pack pictures, the ones that say “hey I went to the gym this summer and this is the final result”. (female, 14)

This suggests that a gender bias is embedded in participants’ interpretation of performances of desirability on SNS, as these tend to promote compliance with the standards of beauty and with a model of sexualization that determines who is considered to be attractive and who is not (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015).

A strategy used specifically by girls is uploading pictures of themselves kissing or hugging another girl. They explain these pictures as a way for them to show their friendship or special relationship with a girlfriend. Boys think girls simply do this to draw men’s attention, to provoke them:

They want people to see these pics and go “look at those two!” ... just so people will talk about them. (male, 17)

Another way to attract peers' attention is teens' choice of usernames. In their own words, they use these ironically in order to draw peers' attention: "Just to catch the eye, so that people will laugh and say: you're so cool" (male, 14). Some of the usernames have a sexual connotation or are based on word play. Some participants agree that using sexualized aliases is a widespread practice, while others claim that is "going out of fashion now" and affirm that they "don't do that anymore". Generally, our interviewees agree that the choice of username depends on the type of SNS: on Tuenti and Facebook, where usernames are generally (closer to) the user's real name, they choose less sexualized aliases than for example on Fotolog, where they "used to go crazy with the usernames" (see Willem *et al.*, 2012).

Just as the ironic use of aliases is part of teens' playfulness when performing desirability, so is the use of coarse language and name-calling:

Yeah well, it's like a joke, people call each other things like this: "hey, you *bitch*, come over here". [chuckles] (female, 15) [...] but people take it with humor, they laugh and say: "I'm on my way, *whore*". (female, 15)

This kind of register is used among boys (*maricón* - 'fag') and girls (*puta* - 'whore' and *perra* - 'bitch') alike. In line with previous research, these results show that the construction of the digital gender identity is gender-biased (Ringrose & Eriksson, 2011; Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015): girls, in their online self-representations, adopt the post-feminist patterns of beauty and the body from the mainstream media (Tortajada, Araña & Martínez, 2013). Gender norms of society and the media can increase the pressure of social comparison and sexual objectification for girls (Ringrose & Eriksson, 2011).

3.3. Managing popularity

For participants, the success of an SNS depends on the number of friends active on the network. Whether to keep a profile updated is determined by the interaction with peers – "if no one ever writes a comment, in the end I don't log in anymore" (female, 16). Some teens let their accounts wither away on deserted SNS. Their motivations to follow online trends are to feel part of the group – "what you do depends on what your peers expect from you" (female, 17) – and to be admired or, in teens' own words, to be "popular". Pictures and texts are uploaded in order to be seen by everyone and commented on; the most important thing is to get as many comments as possible, regardless if they are good or bad.

To cause an impact on people you do or say something that no one has ever done or said before, just to become popular. (male, 17)

If there are many people doing something, including the popular ones, then the normal ones may also do it so everybody will like them. (female, 18)

All interviewees agreed that the best strategy to become popular is to upload personal, eye-catching photos, to update your status all the time (what you are doing and what is happening around you), and to have a lot of “friends” who are popular themselves.

[Being popular is] having a lot of friends, 300 or more than 300, uploading loads of pictures so that people comment on them, and posting things on your wall all the time. (male, 14)

I know a boy who has 3,000 [friends] but he’s one of those super-popular guys; he goes out every week. (female, 16)

Indeed, going out at night frequently and telling your friends about it on Facebook is crucial to becoming popular: “The most popular girls are the hottest ones, or the ones who go out most often to where everybody goes.” (male, 17).

The young people of our sample know that self-presentation, in this case through pictures, helps to win popularity and the acceptance of others (Mascheroni, Vincent & Jiménez, 2015). In the next section, however, we will see that popularity comes at a price and that there is a thin line between being considered popular and being considered “slutty”, that is, especially in the case of girls.

3.4. Double standard: *canis* and *pijas*

Findings from the interviews suggest that participants tend to read peers’ performances in a binary judgemental system of *canis* and *pijas*. Interviewees define a person who is *cani* as follows:

Canis usually take pictures in their underwear, in the bathroom with the toilet in the background and everything, and smoking or drinking [...], and the more they can make people think they have slept with boys, the worse their reputation, the more popular they seem to be. (female, 15)

Canis are also the kind of girls who spell their own name differently on social media, use more sexualized or slutty aliases and are associated with a particular sexual attitude:

To upload that kind of things is very *cani*, and on top the girls that upload that kind of stuff are usually the most slutty ones. (female, 15)

On the other side of the spectrum, there are the *pijas*: in context of SNS these girls usually don’t have sexualized aliases and the pics they upload are not so explicitly provocative.

If they are *pijas* they will usually take pictures together with their girlfriends on a shopping spree, or when they are seeing their friends, or on their own at home but with

a white background and with bright lights. They make more pictures with a particular style of clothes. (female, 15)

However, the teens in our study do not only judge others' displays, but also their own performances. For some girls, for example, being *pija* is considered to be an ideal as opposed to being *cani*. In any case, to define oneself in terms of one model or another is an identity option to be faithful to forever, both on and offline:

You choose between the *canis* and the *pijas*; I would define myself within the prototype of the *pija*. (female, 15)

From the interviews it became clear that participants use a double standard to classify each other: they are aware that everybody shows off their bodies, but boys who show their muscles get less criticism than girls who pose in sexy outfits.

When you see a girl with a lot of those pictures, you say to yourself: "she's just good for a fling, nothing serious". (male, 14)

On the one hand, provocative pictures are often meant "ironically", as many interviewees have confirmed, but they imply some consequences that are especially tough on women on the other hand: just like in offline interactions, our research has shown that this double standard punishes women with sexually loaded insults ("slut") that degrade them vis-à-vis men, who are only thought to be "show-offs" when they do the same.

One boy says: "How can you upload a picture like this, aren't you ashamed? Cover up a bit!" (male, 14).

Indeed, girls feel a greater pressure to engage in sexualized self-representations – either to please or to capture the boys' attention – but they end up suffering from insults whether they do it or not: when they sexualize themselves they are "sluts" and if they refuse they are "prude" (Lippman & Campbell, 2014). This "classed discourse of the slut" (Jackson & Vares, 2015) provokes a "double" double standard: on the one hand, the sexualization of boys and girls is perceived and judged differently; and on the other hand, only for girls, negative sexualized judgements are used. This female sexualization, then, is read in terms of lack of taste, little cultural capital and/or low class if it is suspected that the girl is *choni* (a category applied to all later judgements of the girl). In the same way, *choni* taste is read in sexual terms: this type of girls tend to show body parts and be promiscuous ("loose girl", "slut" or "whore" are some of the qualifiers they receive), which shows the deep interrelation between gender and class (Skeggs, 2005), in this case regarding gender displays (Goffman, 1979). What is considered as slutty and what is not seems to be a carefully and meticulously defined degree of particular features that are only obvious to the network peers. You can sexualize yourself to some meas-

ure, as long as you do not pass the line. In this sense, we can draw on Blommaert & Varis' concept of "enoughness": "Enoughness [...] involves judgement calls by others in which the particular 'dose' of features displayed and enacted by someone is ratified or rejected." (Blommaert & Varis, 2013: 149).

4. Discussion and conclusions

In line with what other researchers have pointed out, the teens in our sample constantly experiment and "perform" their relationships for their online networked publics (Boyd, 2008), and confirm that receiving feedback from their audience – known or imagined – is the main goal when posting content online (Stern, 2008). These studies also conclude that teens' desire to be popular on social media responds to a more general goal to be approved of by peers, meaning they must face the group pressure and the construction of what it means to be cool (Boyd, 2008), or what mainstream culture considers to be cool (Stern, 2008). Particular attention is paid to physical appearance, fashion and image, already from a very young age (Chittenden, 2010). In this constant process of presentation in SNS the main themes are being good-looking – or as good-looking as possible – and to project a "desired image" of oneself, in order to be desirable for relationships (Young, 2009; Sevick Bortree, 2005). We have tried to find out how exactly the Spanish participants in this study put the strategies to achieve these goals into practice.

As to management of desirability, our outcomes suggest that these young people use at least two intertwined and complementary strategies in order to attract peers: *sexualization* and *playfulness/humor*. According to our participants, just posting many pictures is not enough if you really want to get your peers' attention: the images should be shocking, funny, surprising or provocative in some way. Anything related to sex, dirty language and swear-words is used for provocation, although according to teens everybody knows "it's a joke". As a paradox, we have seen that (perceived) authenticity is another key concept in teens' identity work, as they play and experiment with both natural and contrived poses.

On playfulness, Goffman (1994) already pointed out to the concept of the actor stepping back to cause the envisaged impact on the audience. In our sample this strategy of using provocative humor is a way for participants to play with their identities and "practice" their feelings, even by overstating or sexualizing them, without risking lasting consequences to reputation and identity, as pointed out earlier by Pascoe regarding teens' emotion management (Pascoe, 2010). Indeed, by provoking others or laughing at them(selves), young people can manage vulnerability – "it was only a joke". Our participants are aware of this identity play and implicitly accept a degree of humor or exaggeration from others. They also know that identities and feelings expressed on SNS are often fake, culturally codified,

idealized, or downright hypocritical. They seem to accept this collective tacit agreement about online codes and netiquette, and go by the rules of the game.

We have identified at least three different areas where sexualization and playfulness are used as complementary strategies to appeal to potential partners: *usernames*, *cleavage/torso*, and the *lesbian pose*. The *lesbian pose* (Willem *et al.*, 2012) or the *lesbian lipstick pose* (Gill, 2009) refers to depictions of two girls showing themselves hugging or kissing each other on the lips as a strategy to appeal to heterosexual male fantasy, rather than as a truly homosexual stance. Indeed, the link between sexualization and playfulness becomes very clear in the figure of the *lesbian pose*: in our home interviews and discussion groups, girls confirmed the existence of this figure but explained it as a “joke” or a display of friendship and humor, although they did also recognize that it “turns on the boys”. Playful sexualization is equally present in pictures of *cleavage* and *torso*, and the choice of *usernames*, as described above.

Our findings also suggest that adolescents use their own truth criteria to classify pictures: pictures of offline group events (or “teen rituals” as pointed out by Boyd, 2010) are perceived as natural or authentic, while selfies are sometimes considered as artificial. This awareness of a “touched up version of oneself” (Stern, 2008) does not mean young people automatically consider their own or others’ public Selves to be “fake”, but rather it reveals the participants’ critical capacity in judging pictures. Although everybody wants – and constantly gets – positive feedback on their pictures, usernames and texts, participants also report the reception of criticism. Everything they do online is judged, and participants self-reportedly get together with their friends to gossip and talk behind a peer’s back from time to time. In this respect, positive comments are often interpreted as mere “tokens” in order for the commenter to look good, not as an expression of approval.

As in other age ranges, young peoples’ Facebook and Tuenti interactions have a strong gender bias: they are constructed and interpreted in terms of masculine and feminine expressions following mainstream media discourse. We can see this in participants’ images, from the way they talk about their experiences, the usernames they choose, the way they sexualize their bodies and, finally, from the social judgements they receive from and apply to others. Additionally, teenagers sexualize their own images and promote the sexualization of others but, at the same time, they condemn some of these practices severely, especially if they concern a lower-class female (double double standard).

The confined spaces of online peer communities allow teens to play with imagery of intimacy and desirability without the interference of adults or the intrusion of authorities. One of our main conclusions is, then, that playfulness and irony as a self-reported leitmotiv in young people’s online practices are crucial for outsiders to understand their social interactions. There is a delicate and complex balance for young people to manage: even if they perfectly master the codes of (sexualized) online representations and even if they invest playfully in the construction of their

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identities and environments, they also have to put up with some of the negative responses to their actions on social media. But despite the double standard and the obvious risks young people are exposed to on social media, ignoring this “fun” factor by minimizing its meaning for them would be a mistake for researchers, educators and parents who want to gain insight into young people’s daily lives. 📌

Note

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