PEER-ING IN THE ONLINE MIRROR: ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS’ DISCLOSURE AND MUTUAL VALIDATION IN PRESENTATIONS OF SELF ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Engl. transl.: PEER-ING IN THE ONLINE MIRROR: ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS’ DISCLOSURE AND MUTUAL VALIDATION IN PRESENTATIONS OF SELF ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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## Sample

“The present study relies on the qualitative (collected in spring 2016) and quantitative data (collected in winter 2016–2017) from the Friends 2.0 project in Romania. In total, twelve in-depth group interviews and 1.600 self-completed questionnaires with adolescents 11–18 years old were collected. The interviews and questionnaires were conducted in selected schools from two urban areas following the ethical guidelines for conducting research with children and young people. For the purpose of this study we considered only children 13–18 years old since we presumed younger children as not perceiving accurately the constraints of others (...) In total 8 single-sex focus groups were analysed (N=32), out of which four with 13–14-year-olds and four with 15–18-year-olds. (...) After considering only 13–18 years old children from the initial sample (as explained above), the resulting sample consisted of 1 102 children which use at least one of the Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp or Snapchat social networks, of whom 50.5 percent were boys and 49.5 percent girls, with an average age of 15.41 (SD=1.56).” (Barbovschi et al., 2018, p. 274)

# Abstract

"Identity building, as a key developmental task for adolescents, is nowadays
analysed as related to performative practices of self-presentation online on social media,
where peer networks play a significant role through their role of reciprocal feedback and
validation. Although at a declarative level young people’s actions within their peer networks
on social media are free and uninhibited choices, they do actually reflect the constraints of
norms and practices within the group and the technological affordances of the medium. In
this paper we describe the multiple negotiations and constraints adolescents face when
constructing their self image on social media and how these practices evolve during different
stages of their development. The analysis draws on qualitative data from young people aged
13 to 18 (8 single-sex focus groups, n=34) and survey data (1 102 self-administered
questionnaires) collected within the Friends 2.0 project (2015–2017). Our findings reveal
complex relations between practices of self-presentation and mutual validation by peers on
social media, with the need for validation playing a significant role in young people’s
creating and curating their self-image online. Furthermore, enforced reciprocal norms about
appropriateness and mutual surveillance create the field in which mechanisms of validation/
invalidation are performed." (Barbovschi et al., 2018, p. 269)

# Outcome

“Our study revealed how identity is constructed using the practices of self-presentation and mutual validation with peers on social media. The need for validation plays an important role in young people’s drive to create and curate their self-image online; however, enforced reciprocal norms about appropriateness and mutual surveillance (Cover, 2015) set the field in which mechanisms of validation and invalidation are performed. The question whether online identity transcends social desirability or acts under the same constraints as offline identity is a legitimate one in relation to adolescents’ performative identity on social media, with studies claiming that the online gives people a unique opportunity to present themselves as they really are (Livingstone, 2008), free from physical or corporeal limitations (boyd, 2014), also without being constrained by different role values. Furthermore, social media enhances certain specificities relevant for adolescent identity formation, such as amplifying dimensions of self-identity, extending group identities and creating more venues for preferred activities, groups, and beliefs (Shapiro and Margolin, 2014). However, one can claim that online identity is actual very similar to the offline (Cover, 2015). The construction of online identity does not take place in a vacuum, but in a space that is governed by its own formal and informal rules. Furthermore, since users reflect on and edit their profiles, it means that all the decisions taken when constructing their online identity have in mind other users (Williams, 2007). The results of our study do not confirm Cover’s theory (2015); adolescents still discern between online and offline identities, with an increased value placed at times on the latter for its perceived controllability in terms of selfpresentation (Williams, 2007), and at other times on the former, which allows for a greater control over audiences and ‘target values’ (Kramer and Haferkamp, 2011). They are equally aware of online self-presentation being more durable, especially in its written form, with an expected impact on future online selves, which highly influences their online performative presentation practices. Nevertheless, adolescents do promote a discourse about authenticity, claiming coherence between their two identities, online and offline. (...) In addition to following young people’s negotiations between self/other and online/offline, our data touched on the specific dynamics triggered by the developmental stage of adolescence, as a period crucial for the psychological development of selfhood (Peter and Valkenburg, 2011), for development of social and cultural literacy (Pasquier, 2008) and as well for digital skills (Livingstone, 2014). With regard to identifications and categorization online, adolescents create identities by distinguishing themselves from and with groups, as the core of performative identity (Buckingham, 2008). Validating each other in informal groups is conducive to constructing identity, but the practices of Unfriending or Unfollowing can be understood from the same perspective, as a form of concern for their image not to be associated with what they perceive as problematic ideas or practices. In this regard, one can agree with Zygmunt Bauman’s idea (2016) that we assist, in the era of social media, to a global echo chamber, in which those who do not fit are simply rejected, without any attempt for understanding them.” ( Barbovschi et al., 2018, pp. 282-283)