“Girls are addicted to likes so they post semi-naked selfies”: Peer mediation, normativity and the construction of identity online

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* Social mediation
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## Sample

Italian, Spanish, and English boys and girls aged 11-16.

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Stepping up awareness and empowerment

# Abstract

This paper examines how children aged 11-16 in three European countries (Italy, UK and Spain) develop and present their online identities, and their interactions with peers. It focuses on young people’s engagement with the construction of an online identity on social media through pictures, and explores how peer-mediated conventions of self-presentation are appropriated, legitimated, or resisted in pre-teens’ and teenagers’ discourses. In doing so, we draw on Goffman’s (1959) work on the presentation of self and “impression management” to frame our analysis. Mobile communication and social network sites serve an important role in the process of self-presentation and emancipation, providing “full-time” access to peers and peer culture. Our findings suggest that there are gender differences and the presence of sexual double standards in peer normative discourses. Girls are positioned as being more subjected to peer mediation and pressure. Boys blame girls for posing sexy in photos, and negatively sanction this behaviour as being aimed at increasing one’s popularity online or as an indicator of “a certain type of girl.” However, girls who post provocative photos chose to conform to a sexualised stereotype as a means of being socially accepted by peers. Moreover, they identify with the pressure to always look “perfect” in their online pictures. While cross-national variations do exist, this sexual double standard is observed in all three countries. These insights into current behaviours could be further developed to determine policy guidance for supporting young people as they learn to manage image laden social media.

# Outcome

"Our findings reflect that in the three countries there are similar issues regarding self-presentation and online impression management. Clear gender differences in the codes and conventions of self-presentation, and the presence of sexual double standards in peer normative discourses emerged. However, the analysis also showed the presence of subtle tensions between the discourses, reflecting idealised models of femininity and masculinity, and the practices in which discourses are embodied and performed.
While photography and self-portraits are generally assumed as being a feminine domain, the findings reveal how central photos are for both girls and boys in the process of presenting oneself to others on SNS. Visual self-presentation is clearly aimed at managing the impressions made on others and gaining acceptance by the peer group. Indeed, conformity to beauty standards and peer conventions is rewarded with peer validation and social legitimation as expressed by the number of likes, which are then equated to a marker of one’s popularity. As a consequence, pictures that conform to a sexualised model of feminine or masculine beauty are understood as attractive in order to get attention.
However, as anticipated, both the codes of self-presentation that closely resemble the visual codes of advertising, and SNS are gendered.
[...] In making sense of the gendered norms regarding the use of photos in the process of “impression management” on SNS, boys and girls mobilise a sexual double standard. [...] According to this normative framework, girls are positioned as being more subjected to both peer mediation and the pressure of an aesthetic model of adult femininity. Boys blame girls for posing sexy in their profile pictures and in the photos they decide to share with others online, and boys negatively sanction this behaviour as being aimed at increasing one’s popularity online or as an indicator of “a certain type of girl.” By contrast, girls who post provocative photos chose to conform to a sexualised stereotype as a means of being socially accepted by both their male and female peers. Moreover, they identify with the pressure to always look “perfect” in their online pictures." (Mascheroni et al., 2015).