

Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media

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Abstract

The rise of visual-based social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok has transformed the digital landscape and become increasingly important for young people who use these platforms as discursive spaces for their self-presentation. Through these platforms, young people engage with dominant norms and societal expectations surrounding gender and attempt to perform a successful visual self that reflects their overall identity. However, these norms and expectations can lead to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and conventional beauty standards. On the other hand, social media also provide a space for challenging traditional gender norms and celebrating non-conforming identities. This study focuses on exploring how young people negotiate and make sense of femininity and masculinity in the digital environment through the creation of fictitious social media profiles using mood boards. Through the analysis of the resulting characters created by our participants, we explored how these visual artefacts tend to reflect or subvert current stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Keywords: gender, digital media, young people, mood boards, masculinity, femininity.

1. Introduction

With the rise of Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, the ecology of social media has changed, and many platforms nowadays focus on visuals (pictures

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Received: 08 February 2023
Accepted: 04 April 2023
Published: 09 February 2024



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and videos). These platforms are becoming a significantly more important part of our contemporary visual culture, especially among teens who often are on the leading edge of this space. A new Pew Research Center survey of American teenagers ages 13 to 17 finds TikTok now is a top social media platform for teens, followed by Instagram and Snapchat (Vogels et al., 2022). Young people use these social media platforms as discursive spaces where they adopt self-presentation strategies and, in doing so, deal with dominant norms and moral understanding of peers and society in general (Naezer, 2018). For them, representing the self on social media means to “interact and negotiate with narratives, social structures and imaginaries in order to mediate and perform their own belonging within a dominant culture of storytelling” (Korkmazer et al., 2021 p. 24). In less anonymous online settings such as social media, where people may tend to express what has been called the “hoped-for possible selves”, users regard their online presentations as an integral part of their overall identity production (Zhao et. al., 2008). This position fits perfectly with the logic of Instagram (Caldeira et al., 2020) and other social media platforms where young people are encouraged to maintain a successful visual self-image, which can help to improve their self-esteem.

The existing dominant norms and societal expectations that affect boys’ and girls’ embodied identity don't disappear in the online environment but continue to regulate the self-representation that young people would like to show to others. In particular, in order to be easily accepted by their peers, young people are more likely to portray themselves in line with, or close to, some of the gender stereotypes rooted in our culture. However, unlike their counterparts in the traditional media circuits, social media afford boys and girls an opportunity through which they can engage in new gendered behaviours and push the boundaries surrounding the normative characteristics and hegemonic qualities of their masculinity and femininity. “The evolution of social media [...] now offers venues where individuals can consciously self-select and present virtual versions of themselves that can either conform with, challenge, or defy societal expectations and media presentations” (Rose et al., 2012, p. 590). More importantly, these media allow anyone to access communities and safe spaces, making visible and celebrating his/her non-conforming identity and lifestyle.

Considering visual culture and social media to be essential to understand young people's everyday life and their complex relations with gender, we decided to focus on how they negotiate and make sense of gender in the digital environment. In order to capture this negotiation process, we decided to involve 922 young people between the ages of 15 and 17 years old who attended secondary school in Padua (a city in the northeast of Italy). They were invited to construct a fictitious social media profile that, in their view, might be more likely to become popular and famous. The profiles were created using mood

Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

boards, a cut-and-paste collage of images arranged and juxtaposed on a sheet, which then become the research data presented in visual form. Our participants were free to choose the type of social media profile, the visual social media, and their subject, using famous influencers, streamers, and content creators of their choice as sources of images and inspiration.

In a previous work (Farci & Scarcelli, 2022), the data collected through the research allowed us to analyse young people's ideas about digital media logic in relation to popularity, their relationship with dominant discourses on gender and popularity, and how these discourses are mediated by digital cultures. In this study, our primary goal was to investigate how the characters created by our participants tended to mirror the same stereotypical gender displays in self-presentation strategies among young people. This research aimed to demonstrate how young people internalize and replicate in their fictional profiles a gendered idea of digital popularity, reproducing inequality based on heteronormativity, as well as reinforcing conventional beauty standards.

2. Theoretical framework

In recent years, a considerable amount of research has centred its attention on teenagers' self-representation on social media. Despite the potential for people to create diverse content on social media, user generated content obviously does not automatically lead to a reduction in stereotypical gender portrayal. As numerous analyses have demonstrated the persistence of stereotypical gender display in mass media (Belknap & Leonard, 1991; Lindner, 2004), developing research suggests that similar gender dynamics are likely to affect the way adolescents present themselves to others through online social media. In their self-presentations, youngsters replicate socially constructed representations of masculinity and femininity and end up engaging in a kind of praxis not dissimilar to that of advertisers, who, according to Goffman (1976), ritualize what is already ritualised. Teenagers seek to strike flashy, attention-seeking poses, and to that end, the gendered depictions they make of themselves tend to be modelled on those they find in advertising and in other audiovisual formats, whose gender stereotypes they often adapt and reproduce (Tortajada-Giménez et al., 2013). This is particularly evident for young women who are found to be more likely to conform to external influences, using self-presentation strategies to gain validation from peers (Haferkamp et al., 2012). As such, girls' online presentations of self-involve complex negotiations between the social status rewards of online self-exposure and the gendered risk of harsh judgement that seems to go along with having been too public (Bailey et al., 2013). They often want to appear attractive and sexually confident,

conforming to a desirable and normative version of femininity, without risking being judged as *slutty* among teen peer groups (Ringrose, 2010). Siibak (2009) reports that girls spend much time selecting pictures that make them “look good” according to mediatized standards of female beauty before posting them online. They most often choose pictures that indicate a desire to appear attractive and sexually appealing (Manago et al., 2008) trying to gain attention by exhibiting their sexuality and not hesitating to use photo editing software to manipulate the photos so as to present themselves as eager to accommodate and please males (Kapidzic & Herring, 2011). As confirmed by Tortajada et al. (2013), female images uploaded to the photo-sharing platform Fotolog are highly sexualised. These pictures are more intimate as the protagonists reveal more naked skin (e.g., lower necklines) and are more often close-ups of parts of the body or face. This practice has become the norm on social media sites. Willem et al. (2011) found that even girls who had not initially posted sexualized pictures moved toward that photographic style over time. The same tendency of gender stereotypical representation can be observed in selfies on Instagram and other social media platforms. As Döring et al. (2016) reveal, stereotypical feminine gender displays that populate mass media are not eliminated in online contexts or user-generated content. Butkowski et al. (2020) find a positive relationship between stereotypical gender display and feedback in the form of likes, total profile followers, and positive or neutral comments. This relationship may encourage young women to adopt gender stereotypical posing in their own selfies in order to be rewarded with metrics of social success. Besides the regulation of women’s bodily display according to normative expectations of femininity, selfie discourse also defines the criteria for women’s acceptable entry into the public sphere (Burns, 2015). Despite the optimistic views on Instagram’s political potential of self-representation to potentially produce more diverse, individualised representations, when users replicate stereotypical gendered cues in their selfies, they align themselves with historical legacies of media stereotyping. As Caldeira et al. state (2018), self-representation on Instagram does not exist in a cultural void but is embedded in popular culture, and thus adopts, often unconsciously, the conventions, discourses, and aesthetics of the film and television industries, of women’s magazines, and of the fashion and beauty industries. Within this context, the increasing visibility gained by social media influencers and online celebrities can be considered responsible for the aesthetic and photographic conventions, and content-related tropes that define the current Instagrammable aesthetics (Caldeira et al., 2022). These conventions can seep into the everyday use of the platform by ordinary women, leading to a careful consideration of lifestyles, objects, and experiences in terms of their visual and aesthetic characteristics, privileging certain items and contexts as particularly photo-worthy, likely to look good on

Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

Instagram and attract likes. As such, especially for those users who want to get tangible social benefits by their engagement with their Instagram content, the posts they share often resemble the deliberate promotional discourses of women's magazines, with a particular focus on projections of success in the domains of career, relationships/parenting, and aesthetics/looks (Duffy et al., 2022). Narrow conceptions of idealised femininity are often integrated into the postfeminist discourse of "sexiness as empowerment" (Caldeira et al., 2018), coinciding partly with one of the shifts in advertising pointed out by Gill (2007). As Gill (2008) argues, in the postfeminist era, women are often represented as subjects with powerful and active sex drives who make choices about their own sex status. This shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification constitutes a "clear break with representations from the past in which women were passive and objectified" (Harvey & Gill, 2011, p. 54). By pleasing themselves, women produce a self-erotic image in which they celebrate their own fetishization and self-objectification. As Dobson (2015) argues, girls and young women are also increasingly called to make themselves publicly visible through digital media production and brand their self-representations in line with the postfeminist model of feminine desirability, which wants them to be sexually attractive and active. So, when using social media, young girls tend to reiterate postfeminism and the neoliberal mentality, according to which successful women are entrepreneurial, aesthetically pleasing, confident, self-expressive and real (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Petersson McIntyre, 2021; Ringrose, 2007). At the same time, they are now encouraged to focus on their private lives and consumer capacities as a means of self-expression and agency and to assert their freedom to become whatever they want to be and fulfill themselves (hence, the concept of empowerment) (McRobbie, 2007).

As in the case of girls, many studies show that boys' choices on social media reproduce all the ideals stereotypically associated with hegemonic masculinity: (hetero-) sexual desire, strength, hardness, independence, and activity (Connell, 1995). In a qualitative content analysis, Sveningsson Elm (2007) shows that women's self-presentation on social media is more related to categories such as relationships and feelings, while men focus on the exposure of status and technology and place higher priority on describing their occupational status and prestige. While girls' style themselves as attractive and sexually available, males' online portrayals conform to stereotypical norms of masculinity, emphasising strength and power (Manago et al., 2008). Men are more likely to share pictures and comments that contain sexual content or references to alcohol (Peluchette & Karl, 2008). Kapidzic and Herring (2011) examine the gender differences in the profile pictures in chat rooms and find girls presenting themselves seductively in posture, gaze, and clothing. In contrast, boys varied little in their dress, but adopted a greater range of behaviours in their profile photos,

including presenting themselves as remote and dominant. Moreover, while the pictures uploaded by girls more frequently show them lying down and in passive and subordinated positions, males show off in more active poses and accentuate their social status by using objects (e.g., cars) as well as formal clothing. (Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2014). However, still men could not freely express certain gendered aspects of themselves on their image-based social media platforms. Revealing these aspects would open them up to unwanted social consequences. Research by Jones (2015) highlights that Bronies (male fans of *My Little Pony*, including the online imageboard 4chan) are often made fun of and treated with contempt, suspicion, and confusion because they disrupt traditional notions of gender and challenge stereotypes regarding hegemonic masculinity.

Other studies demonstrate how young men are deviating from positions once associated with hegemonic standards of male representations, playing with a variety of different versions of masculinity on their profile images on social media. Analysing visual identity management of young men on social media, Siibak (2010) suggests that young men pay a lot of attention when selecting their profile images and are influenced by the posing techniques of male models in advertisements. The influence of advertising is visible in the shifting from a purely stereotypical masculine self-presentation to a newer more androgynous form of masculinity, usually depicted in idealised and eroticized fashion. “When constructing their masculine self-presentations, young men in the online community tend to emphasise the aspects previously considered feminine, for example, their awareness of fashion trends and hairstyles. Thus, the results indicate that the young men do not only conform to the prevailing mental patterns imposed by the society but also initiate some changes in the roles, norms, and expectations in the dominant version of masculinity” (p. 419). This discovery also applies to Parkins and Parkins’ study (2021) on how male influencers demonstrate masculinity through their posts and comments. They demonstrate that some male influencers are shifting away from patriarchal forms of masculinity and are showing more interest in grooming and fashion, therefore highlighting a metrosexual mode of masculinity. This process may be better explained as a consequence of what John Mercer describes as “saturated masculinity” (2017), in which there is such a multitude of differing and sometimes contradictory or competing representations of masculinities that the meaning of masculinity becomes ever more elastic and fluid.

Even if social media represent an environment of elevated public surveillance, which makes both girls and boys present themselves more in accordance with gender norms than what they would do in face-to-face contexts, there is evidence that in western popular culture over the past few years, especially in adolescence, there has been less emphasis on expressing traditional dualistic gender roles as a means to achieve acceptance in modern

society. Contradicting findings in other studies, Oberst et al. (2016) demonstrate that youngsters tend to present themselves online in a less gender-stereotypical way than they see themselves in an offline context and are also more likely to describe themselves as androgynous.

3. Research

This research was an integral part of the project executed within the framework of an agreement between the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education, and Applied Psychology (FISPPA) of the University of Padua and the Municipality of Padua. The whole empirical work consists in a qualitative study carried out among secondary school students. In Italy, the institutional educational career is divided into Primary school (5 years, starting from 6 years old), Lower Secondary school (3 years) and Upper Secondary school (5 years, from 14 to 19 years old). To guarantee a diverse group in terms of social and cultural capital, we involved different types of secondary schools in Padua with a total of 42 classes (3 vocational - 6 classes, 4 general/academic - 18 classes, and 5 technical - 18 classes) and 922 participants from 15 to 17 years old (461 described themselves as female, 452 as male and 9 as non-binary). The project has been approved by the FISPPA department ethical committee. To obtain participants' informed consent, the schools advised all the parents/guardians about the project and obtained their consent. After this phase, the schools gave to the researchers the authorization to meet students and collect data. In relation to participants, the activity was not mandatory. Teachers had explained to students the goal of the research some days before the meeting and when the researchers described the structure of the workshop to the class, they reminded them that they could choose to not participate. During the activities the teacher was not in the (virtual) classroom.

Using the Padlet platform, the researchers created a mood board structure for the activity. The mood boards consisted of three sections. The first section, "Our Character", contained general information about the characters, including their name, gender, age, description, occupation, and hobbies. The second section, "Platforms", provided a space for participants to list the platforms on which their character would present a visually successful self. The third section was divided into sub-sections related to each specific platform. For instance, participants were asked to provide information such as the character's bio, profile photo, examples of stories, and examples of posts for platforms like Instagram.

Due to the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, all workshops were conducted online using Google Meet, the platform used by schools during

that time. The classes, with an average of 25 students each, were divided into 3 or 4 groups of seven to eight students. Wherever possible, we sought to create exclusively male or female groups. Our aim was to determine whether the gender composition of the group influenced the choice of visual and textual elements utilized in crafting their fictional profiles.

Students entered a designated breakout room supervised by a researcher. The researcher's role was to provide support when needed and observe the group's interaction. Each group was asked to invent a character that could become popular with people of their age. The aim was for participants to *step into the character's shoes*, envisioning how they would represent themselves on digital platforms. Motivating them to create a shared representation of what they believed to be a popular character was useful to understand how digital media logic intertwines with self-representation and the notion of popularity among young people.

In the first part of the activity, each group utilized the Padlet platform and mood board to develop and describe their character. Once the general profile descriptions were ready and the groups decided which platforms their characters would use, the researchers instructed the groups to construct the social media profiles using content freely available on the web and social media platforms, using their own computers or smartphones. Mood boards, as a visual research approach, allow participants to express beliefs and abstract ideas without the need to articulate them verbally. With their simplicity and accessibility, mood boards can transcend language barriers and enable participants to convey concepts through imagery in a natural and intuitive manner (Spawforth-Jones, 2021).

Once the mood boards were completed, we asked our participants to tell the story of their fictional characters and explain their choices of text and visuals. In a previous work (Farci & Scarcelli, 2023), we analysed the material collected through group discussion to trace discursive patterns in relation to digital popularity and its relationship with the dominant discourses on gender. In this research we decided to conduct a qualitative text analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) of the visual artefacts created by our participants by inductively and thematically coding the visual data in detail. These codes were identified through re-reading the data and creating categories that considered both the images and the descriptive elements in the mood board. The factors we looked at were: (1) the type of school attended by our participants, (2) the gender distribution in the group, (3) the gender, sex, and age of the profile, (4) physical characteristics such as skin tone, hair colour, body weight, etc., (5) occupation and hobbies, and (6) the social media platforms used.

The production of mood boards provides researchers with insights into the self-presentation strategies employed by boys and girls to portray their idea

Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

of an ideal male or female profile. Additionally, simulating the creation of fictional profiles helps in understanding how visual conventions and discourses about femininity and masculinity, prevalent in mass media, are perpetuated in digital environments. It also explores whether social media has the potential to showcase a wider diversity of gender representations.

4. Results

During this study our participants created fictitious social media profiles using images taken from a range of different sources to construct a particular visual representation of the male or female character that is likely to become popular. In relation to the invented profiles, 46 groups went for a male character and 49 for female character (N=95). The average age of the male profiles is 19.4, while the average age of the female profiles is lower and is around 18. According to our participants, the popularity of the female characters is closely linked to the fashion industry (N=19), followed by sex work (N=5) and fitness (N=4). While in the case of women the selection of activities appears rather limited, in the case of men digital popularity is related to a wider of occupations, varying from music (N=9) to gaming (N=9) and from entertainment (N=8) to sport (N=7). Remarkably, the majority of our participants chose to create a social media profile on Instagram (N=65), followed by Tik Tok (N=15), Twitch (N=8) and YouTube (N=6).

In-depth analyses of the male fictional accounts reveal four distinctive groups that demonstrate the persistence of some traditional male archetypes, influenced by the representations of men in traditional media and advertising industry. The first common type that emerges from our analysis falls into the category of “street masculinity” (N=6). These profiles were created by groups composed solely or predominantly by male participants - mainly from technical or vocational schools. “Street masculinity” model celebrates representations of men who stand apart from society’s institutions and responsibilities and are rewarded for skills and talents without being compromised or constrained by institutional hierarchies and requirements. Being in control of one’s own actions, acting independently of others, and being self-sufficient are essential pillars of “street masculinity”. Men activating street masculinities emphasise the value of these qualities. (Mullins & Cardwell-Mullins, 2006). Street masculinity can be splintered into two stereotyped depictions: a charismatic rap artist, such as members of famous Italian hip hop groups Dark Polo Gang or Seven Zoo, and a swaggering *bad ass* character who challenges societal institutions, like Don Ali, a former young Twitch streamer who became famous because of his childhood pranks and amusing risk-rankings. These male characters are usually

portrayed thin and with a slender physique, looking straight ahead, enacting self-confidence, while repressing emotions or other signs of weakness. The favourite social networks of these fictional profiles are Instagram and YouTube.

The second type of male character that appears in our analysis relates to men who perform work activities or specific passions in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as fitness and bodybuilding, cars, and financial investments. Created by groups composed mainly by men and exclusively from technical or vocational schools, “men-of-action” (N=11) travel to exotic places, take part in dangerous activities such as motorcycling or street painting or practise high-intensity sports such as bodybuilding. Rugged individualism, ambition and desire for success, self-expansion, and most of all, the urge to dominate are all male attributes particularly evident in these mood boards (Lauzen et al., 2008). “Men-of-action” exhibit more assertive goals than their female counterparts and are celebrated for their individual accomplishments, display of superhuman skill, and inimitable personal style. Some fictional accounts, both consciously and unconsciously, seem to embody the explorer/adventurer archetype, depicting men who travel around the world, visit interesting places, and appear to be risk takers and thrill-seekers, exciting and untamed (Moss, 2011). Professional athletes and their sporting achievements offer another important domain in which the men-of-action script is depicted on the analysed mood boards (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Characters of this kind serve as prototypical visual representations of hegemonic masculinity, where physical strength, athleticism and competitiveness are valued over other masculine forms (Connell, 1995). The main social network chosen by these fictional profiles is Instagram, except for the one created by a female group, that selected Tik Tok.

The third type of fictional character recurring among male profiles is the “geek” (N=10). “Geek” is a label historically associated with mockery and an outsider status (Kendall, 2002). It is usually applied to socially awkward and clumsy white middle-class educated men who compensate for their failure to achieve certain masculine markers, such as bodily strength, sexual prowess, and athleticism, by valorising their technology-based competence in fields such as computer, engineering, internet, or video gaming (Salter & Blodgett, 2017). Created by groups composed mainly by men and exclusively from technical or vocational schools, the geeks of these fictional profiles are inspired by some of the most famous Italian streamers on Twitch, such as Maseo, Ciccio Gamer, and Zano XVII, young people aged between 20 and 30 who have become famous thanks to the ironic and irreverent style with which they offer gameplay content and video reactions or just YouTube or Twitch chats. Even though geek profiles seem to distance themselves from normative masculinity, by

Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

clowning, making ridiculous facial expressions, wearing stupid and funny clothes, and using irony in order to mock the excesses of hypermasculinity, they end up endorsing and reproducing some stereotypically masculine traits, such as competitiveness, assertiveness, confidence, and independence. In terms of their physical appearance, these men can be short, not necessarily skinny, ugly, far from being conventionally attractive, and less worried about their appearance than their female counterparts (Rosewarne, 2016).

The last type of fictional character recurring among male profiles is the so-called “spornosexual” (N=10). “Spornosexual” is a portmanteau of sports star and porn star that represents men who spend all their free-time pumping iron at the gym primarily for reasons of appearance (instead of fitness or health) and post the result of their hard work on social media (Hakim, 2018). In the framework of a spornosexual model, straight men are portrayed with some stereotypically feminine traits, such as taste in grooming and look, and their bodies are displayed as an object of desire and looking (Nixon, 1996). Remarkably, most of the fictional profiles that can be labelled as spornosexual show young men embracing practices stereotypically associated with women, such as dancing on Tik Tok or working in the fashion industry. It is worth noting that these profiles are conceived by groups composed mainly by female students, confirming that women are more willing than men to combine traditional stereotypes of masculinity with ideas associated with the new age man, or a metrosexual, in particular. These female participants place great importance on physical attractiveness and have a clear idea of how the perfect guy should look: tall, with brown and curly hair, green eyes, with luscious lips and dark skin. As shown in our research, the popular and beautiful men imagined by young women have an almost feminine prettiness to their appeal. They don't quite look overtly masculine in an aggressively sexual or potent way but evoke a kind of introverted and delicate depth.

As far as female accounts are concerned, the most common type that emerges from our analysis is the so-called “girl next door” (N=16). Created by groups composed equally by male and female students, these profiles follow stereotypical feminine conventions: they are young, good looking, with little visible fat or muscle and carry several visual markers of hegemonic femininity (in contemporary western contexts), such as long hair, noticeable make-up, gendered clothing (e.g., dresses or skirts). Moreover, the “girl next door” profiles portray girls performing stereotypical gender displays consistent with Goffman's (1976) analysis of advertising which found that women were more likely to be represented acting appeasing gestures such as head or body canting, bending one knee inward or lying down. In other cases, they tend to imitate the hyper-ritualization of licensed withdrawals – posers gazing into space or into the floor or focusing their look somewhere in a far distance. However, even

though these profiles tend to replicate narrow standards of female attractiveness, the “girl next door” version of femininity exhibits the female figure that is ordinary and everyday, echoing the amateur aesthetic of social networks such as Instagram. Practices of representation here are reframed according to particular Instagrammable aesthetics (Caldeira et al., 2022). Such aesthetics is characterised by less studiously curated content production, made by ordinary users, using less high-tech tools of image production – such as smartphones – and by depictions of everyday contexts, often absent from traditional media. Thus, the “girl next door” aims at retaining an impression of confidence and intimacy and bridging the distance with their audience. According to Kanai, these female representations play a central role in providing spaces of a disciplinary homosocial intimacy for girls, a desirable sameness – a relatability – that feels as though it closes down distances between women (Kanai, 2019).

As in the “girl next door” prototype, the fictional character of the “fashion girl” (N=14) displays a version of normative femininity and ideal beauty that is limited to the strict standards of the young, white, able-bodied, well-groomed, thin, and conventionally attractive young woman who at least seems to be heterosexual (Gill, 2007). Unlike the “girl next door”, however, the “fashion girl” tends to confirm some of the conventions, discourses, and aesthetics which are embedded in the historical bedroom culture of the teenage magazine, echoing the commercial logics that mark traditional mass media as well as their carefully produced professionalised aesthetics. While the “fashion girl” exploits more the codes of mainstream fashion, the “girl next door” uses more intimate representations. Both, however, seem to replicate the image of traditional femininity (pink, delicate, decorative, cutesy, and so on) that has become ubiquitous in globalised mediascapes through advertising, music videos, films, TV, and celebrity culture. The tendency for women to be infantilised observed in advertising, for example, constitutes one of the most prominent visual gender stereotypes that can be found to a larger extent in our fictional profiles. Moreover, both “girl next door” and “fashion girl” prototypes promote a heavily feminised influencer culture that privileges and rewards feminised content deeply entwined with consumption, beauty, fashion, and makeup, through the contentification of all aspects of their personal and intimate lives (Abidin, 2016). In fact, a lot of participants use famous female influencers or young models, such as Federica Scagnetti, Kyle Jener or Giulia Salemi to source images for the construction of their female fictional profiles.

Successful sex workers or cam girls, mostly having OnlyFans profiles, offer another important domain in which the “fashion girl” script is depicted on the analysed mood boards. A good portion of these profiles portray young women appearing in décolleté outfits showing the upper part of their breasts or in very

Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

short ones, baring their legs, being in underwear, recalling the conventions and characteristics of mainstream heterosexual pornography (overly large artificial looking breasts, high heels, excessive makeup, flesh-revealing clothing and clothing which draws attention to sexual and erogenous zones). They present themselves in suggestive soft porn poses, in depictions that are very similar to those found on erotic websites (Willem et al., 2012). These fictional accounts are created by groups composed mainly or exclusively by men (except one), confirming how nowadays a lot of young men tend to align female characters with exaggeratedly feminine and sexy bodily properties.

Finally, the last type of fictional character is the so-called “active girl” (N=9). Projected by groups composed mainly by female students, the young women present in this sample are depicted in occupations not traditionally considered feminine, such as video gaming, football, music or campaigning for gender equality and body positivity and against gender violence or LGBTQ+ discrimination. The “active girl” challenges restrictive views of the representation of women, not being afraid of showing images of ordinary bodies with curves, cellulite, stretchmarks, and fat. In this sense, they distance themselves from the highly stereotypical and hyper-feminine representations recurring in the other fictional profiles.

5. Conclusions

In our research, we presented an articulate understanding of the contradictions that arise from the impact of social media on gender representation in the lives of young people. As mentioned in the introduction, these contradictions are supported by recent literature, which demonstrates how platforms like TikTok and Instagram can both challenge and reinforce norms and expectations related to sexuality and gender identity among young people (De Ridder, 2015). On one hand, numerous studies have found that social media plays a significant role in reproducing gender-based inequality and heteronormativity, as well as reinforcing conventional beauty standards. On the other hand, recent research suggests that social media platforms provide young people with the opportunity to challenge traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, subverting widely recognized tropes and gender norms.

While social media has the potential to challenge gender norms, our findings indicate that they often end up reinforcing them. The stereotypical gender displays that populate mass media are not eliminated in online contexts of user-generated content but continue to affect how the youth make use of strategies of self-representation to reach social validation and popularity (Caldeira et al., 2020). This is in line with Dobson’s (2015) observation that the

proliferation of digital self-representation practices does not necessarily lead to profound or lasting changes in gender ideologies, as mediated self-representations are linked to the markets and profit systems that characterise platforms' logic and affect how girls and boys imagine their presence on digital media.

First, our mood boards show many connections with normative ideas about masculinity and femininity that Rose et al. (2012) describe as follows: “In contemporary media and culture, women’s and men’s social desirability and gender have often been defined in terms of their bodies. For women, this has often involved comparing themselves to and even replicating the ‘thin ideal’ [...], altering their bodies to heighten perceived sexuality or youthfulness (through cosmetic surgery, exercise, or eating), or conforming to traditional definitions of femininity, including qualities such as submissiveness or sentimentality (through dress, cosmetics, style, etc.). For men, gender-based definitions of success frequently revolve around presenting or developing their bodies as strong, youthful, active, and physically dominant” (p. 590). Our research confirms the above statements. The majority of created profiles incorporate stereotypical traits of femininity and masculinity. Both the “girl next-door” and the “fashion girl” continue to be rooted in western beauty standards epitomised by influencers, celebrities, and young models: stick-thin, skinny waistline, perfect skin, full lips and large breasts. However, feminine self-presentation varies depending on whether the profile is designed by predominantly male or female groups. When created by groups composed by males, the feminine body is idealised as overtly decorative or fantastically pornified (Attwood, 2006), constructed as primarily responsive to male sexuality (Berger, 1972).

While body image takes on a crucial role in female fictional characters, continuing to replicate narrow standards of beauty and attractiveness, male mood boards provide a greater variety of men’s bodily condition. In a few cases, the visual presentations of the male bodies on our mood boards confirm a stereotypical image of hypermasculinity, i.e.

the visibility of the male body and specifically the spotlighting of muscles as ‘natural’ signs of masculine power (Jeffords, 1993). The male body is used here not only as a synonym for masculine strength, but as a sign of meritocratic achievement (Baker & Walsh, 2018). However, bulging muscles and rock-hard physiques do not always represent the standard against which men’s bodies are judged. Many fictional characters depict men that are trim, physically agile, well-defined but not excessively large. In other cases, visual profiles place less emphasis on cultural beauty standards. There are men ironically depicted as ugly, fat, bald, short or too skinny, who do not match the requirements of hegemonic masculinity in terms of bodily evaluation. It can be said that such

Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

representations work to carve out a new model of masculinity in which men can demonstrate their independence, strength, and control by suggesting that they are *man enough* to ridicule dominant norms of manhood. Moreover, these profiles tend to overcompensate their lack of some stereotypical masculine traits such as muscularity and physical strength by valorizing other salient forms of masculine power like aggressive displays of technical self-confidence and hands-on ability for success (Kendall, 2002). These male self-presentations reconstruct “manliness to mean the mastery of technology as opposed to the body, and the ability to dominate in textual or intellectual games as opposed to athletics” (Condis, 2018, p. 20). The only exceptions are the characters created exclusively by female students. In this case, visual profiles reproduce aesthetic metrosexuality (Coad, 2008) characterised by a prominent attention to appearance, fashion, and grooming and an overt eroticization of the male body. However, although these young men are represented in areas traditionally seen as feminine such as fashion, health or fitness, such activities are often reconfigured in heterosexual terms. Indeed, the visual artefacts created by our participants perpetuate an “heterosexual imaginary” (Ingraham & Saunders, 1996) that largely ignores the existence of any queer subjectivities, let alone racialized minorities. The presence of fictional identities that are outside the gender binary is practically non-existent in our sample.

In conclusion, our research confirms that both male and female participants of the study are influenced by gender stereotypes and societal expectations and rely on masculine and feminine stereotypes in their online presentations. However, there are differences in the way male and female students handle such stereotypes regarding both their own gender and the opposite one. When creating male fictional profiles, men tend to emphasise rugged individualism, adventurous spirit, risk taking, displays of physical prowess, and most of all, a high degree of self-confidence. Nonetheless, the emphasis on physical appearance and attraction is not always the central aspect in reinforcing manliness in these profiles. Geek character, for example, still embodies the power, dominance, and control that are central to hegemonic masculinity, yet through a different set of values and practices that do not depend on physical strength or muscularity. In this sense, the irony often present in these profiles allows the expression of patriarchal power in a manner that is socially acceptable and not considered intimidating. When creating a female profile, men often portray girls as objects of desire for male heterosexual viewers. Even though these representations of young women, such as the “girl next-door” and the “fashion girl” characters, may depict them as active and sexually confident, they actually reflect men’s fantasy of sexual objectification rather than women’s active choice about their sexual subjectification. These fictional profiles seem to recall what Kimmel defines a “pornotopia” (Kimmel,

2008): the illusion of a fully sexualized world where men are satisfied because gorgeous women are always willing to conform to their desires.

While male-created characters ultimately reinforce dominant masculinity, the fictional profiles imagined by girls convey complex and conflicting messages. Some of them remark several visual markers of hegemonic femininity, such as long hair, noticeable make-up, gendered clothing, confirming how contemporary western ideals of beauty are still dominated by mostly white, young, thin, flawless, conventionally attractive young women who at least seem to be heterosexual. On the contrary, the profiles labelled as active girls offer a different idea of femininity, not constructed around the bodily property of sexiness. These girls are engaged in activities not traditionally marked as feminine and fit in the contemporary rhetoric of the so-called “can-do girl” (Harris, 2003), the rhetoric that celebrates young women as a vanguard of a new self-making, resilient, and flexible subjectivity, that is best positioned to succeed in an individualised and meritocratic neoliberal society.

In the case of male profiles created by female students, boys are coded in ways that give permission for them to be looked at and desired by the female audience. Although these depictions may come to normalise the idea that men’s bodies can be just as sexually objectified as women’s bodies, they end up reflecting vestiges of the hegemonic male - heterosexual, muscular, and white.

As our research shows, despite the potential for the Internet to challenge gender stereotypes, the complex and contradictory norms and expectations that affect our gendered bodies have not disappeared but continue to regulate the participation of young women and men in the spheres of digital cultural production and self-representation.

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Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

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Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
of Femininity and Masculinity on Social Media
Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

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Negotiating Gender in the Digital Age: Young People and the Representation
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Manolo Farci, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli

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