AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN TEENAGERS' USE, CONSUMPTION AND DIGITAL PRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

Today's teenagers have a very close relationship with ICTs and the digital space related to them, as they have impacted the way the youth constructs their sense of self and the tools they use to perform their carefully constructed identity. One key element which influences the way one constructs their views by themselves is within the boundaries set by their biological sex and therefore through the behaviors associated with their asigned gender. Through the symbolic interactionist lense, or more specifically through Goffman's dramaturgical theory on the manner in which one presents him/herself in society, this paper looks at the manner in which teenagers use social media platforms and at the way they consume and create digital content in order to present their gender identity. The way teenagers consume and produce digital content differs and depends on how they interpret their ideals of femininity and masculinity, which are afterwards reproduced in the content they post on their social media pages. Therefore this research is an attempt to understand what are the factors teenagers take in account when consuming and producing content. What gender differences can be observed in regards to new media consumption? What difference can be observed in online activity behaviors between males and females? How do they feel about their gender identity concerning fitting in with their peer group? A mix-methodological approach was engaged in the data collection process. In the first stage of the research highschool students (n=324) from the city of Suceava (Romania) participated in taking an online survey. The initial intent was to meet with the young respondents in person, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic this was deemed impossible. For the second stage of data collection, six of the participants who took the online survey were invited to participate in a focus group designed to grasp a better understanding of the results from the previous stage. The discovered findings uncover engaging gender similarities and differences in social media consumption and the type, subject, matter and style in which they posted their content, but also in regards to the performance of the self between the online and offline space.

Keywords: *teenagers, online activity, gender identity, symbolic interactionism, social media*

INTRODUCTION

With the introduction of Internet Communication Technologies (ICTS), the internet began to be more accessible, in accordance to the needs and ambitions of modern society. This development and integration of various software and platforms paved the way for the possibility of computer mediated communications (CMCs), which refers to the process or act of communication that takes place between two or more individuals through various digital technologies, such as computers, smartphones, laptops and so on [1]. CMCs can be observed especially through the help of social networking sites (SNSs) which are online platforms that offer and 'represent a vast and varied cultural milieu based on interaction among users and user-generated content' [2] (p.60). Through various tools and options SNSs became a place where the user can come into play with multiple forms of active self-representation. When reaching adolescence, teenagers begin to outreach beyond their immediate family, in order to seek independence and new communities where they can form a sense of self which fits in a larger social scheme [3] [4]. boyd (2014) states that '[t]eens engage with networked publics for the same reasons they have always relished publics; they want to be a part of the broader world by connecting with other people and having the freedom of mobility' [5] (p.10). One of the main elements which affect the individual's perspective of their self-representation from a young age is gender. This article offers a brief exploration of the impact the digital space and communication technologies (ICTs) have on teenagers and to showcase if the gender differences, that are present and encouraged in offline social settings, still persist in the online space.

Review of relevant literature and theoretical framework

In this sense, one can argue that the implementation of new media technologies and the Internet has unleashed essential and structural changes to the overall environment which affected the quality of information and the meanings that are associated with it [4]. Social media platforms have been engineered from the get go to be places where social actors can retreat from the offline realm and be met with an easily accessed global space where they can actively communicate, share, consume and produce content. This type of structure helps to create online communities which center around certain areas or goals of similar interest. Within this digital environment, engagement with other users leads to a surge in and fosters creativity, innovation, knowledge and the desire to have a civic presence. Martin et al. (2018) captures this in her own research, as she points out the fact that the youth from various age groups sign in and stay connected on social media sites like Facebook due to the fact that this allows them to communicate with their peers outside of institutionalised or controlled settings and collaborate on their various school assignments and projects, thus creating a place which is also suitable for learning. Other platforms, like Instagram, represent a space which is more associated with the exploration and expression of one's self or one's idealised self, meaning that personal image and the way themselves are presented

in front of others is important during adolescence. Gender plays a big role in this aspect and expressing anything that could lead to a negative impact on their social standing is seen as a cause of concern by teenagers [6]. This outlook fits with the symbolic interactionist, or better said with Goffman's dramaturgy theory which stated that during their daily social encounters individuals perform through the way they behave and the products and content they consume in order to win the esteem and acceptance of the of the social actors with whom they associate or wish to associate with [7]. Within this research Goffman's theory functions as the theoretical framework that helps guide the entire process.

In social studies, gender is understood as being a category which lacks a homogenous structure, but rather it is impacted and influenced by several other factors such as one's social status and display. In other words gender is perceived as being "'derived from socialization and social context and thus potentially both multiple and fluid'" [8] (p.161). This viewpoint is also captured by [9] in her research of gender differences in online consumption and content production, where she looks at how the stereotypes are created in connection to gender and the type of behaviour males and females are expected to perform in social settings. The constant wave of information which is received from a young age in what is considered appropriate behaviour associated with one's sex, and being socially conditioned at first by family and the media and later on by peers, leads to a different type of attitude towards the internet and technology. She also argues that these stereotypes, or socially expected behaviours, which teenagers have been exposed to from a very young age, can also cause specific consumption patterns and preferences. This view is also supported by Goffman's theory, as he argues that while the individual is performing on the front stage, S/he are showing what they seem to believe attractive and generally accepted traits, while when they reside in their back stage they are acting in a less restrictive manner. This research looks at how teens view gender, content made by both male and females and about the type of content they consume and how they consume it.

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

Introduction

This research's intent is mostly to present and analyse the collected data in an exploratory, interpretive and descriptive manner in order to properly capture the way in which teenagers feel about social media, how they use it and what do they think about the way the opposite sex uses it. This study mostly aims to identify if there are any key differences in the way these processes occur in regards to gender. In order to achieve these goals, a mixed methodological approach was undertaken which is more clearly laid out in the Data Analysis section.

Instruments

The first instrument used was an online questionnaire which was designed with the guide of two studies [10] [11] whose focus was the exploration of gender

identity and social media activity. Both of these studies focus on the experience, risks and opportunities children and teenagers encounter in the digital space and also on the differences in online practices and consumption that might occur between male and female youths. The reason for choosing to use an online questionnaire, rather than engaging face-to-face with the respondents, is due to the fact that the current data was collected during the high point of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID19) pandemic in Romania. The questionnaire is made out of four parts. The first one being about socio-demographic information regarding the respondents, such as their age, gender and the school year they are in. The second part inquires about the digital devices they use, the frequency and duration of their activities on social media platforms, the time they spend online and the types of platforms they engage with. The third part is concerned with their online activities, motivations that led them to engage on social media and the measures they took to minimise risk. The fourth part focuses on representation on social media, gender identity and peer conformity.

The second instrument which was applied was a focus group. The focus group plan and guide were constructed through the guide of [8] research on differences on gender consumption and interpretation of various media. In similar fashion this study used two YouTube clips which had the same subject matter but one was created and presented by a female and one by a male. These clips were used as conversation starters and the questions from the guide were used to further the conversation. The focus group session was also conducted during the COVID19 pandemic, but as the state of emergency in Romania was lifted it became possible to meet in person with the respondents as long as certain safety measures were taken. Therefore, with the consent from the parents, a meeting was set out in the open, to be more precise in an acquaintance's yard, and the chairs were spread out in order to not sit close to each other. The guide was made out of several open-ended questions concerning their feelings about the internet and social media, the experiences they had on their most used social media platforms, the type of online content consumed and the type of content they post.

Sampling and Data Collection

The population this study focuses on are teenagers between the ages of 15-19 years old, both male and female, located and studying in the county of Suceava, which is situated in the North-East region of Romania. As the data was collected during the pandemic, three sampling strategies were employed in order to reach the targeted population. The first one was a strategy of convenience as key individuals who have access to a large number of young people, such as teachers from local highschools, were contacted and received the link to the questionnaire which they later distributed to their pupils. In other cases where the parents were familiar with one of the researchers, they were contacted directly asking for their approval of their child participating in the research. The second strategy which was employed is that of snowballing. After engaging over the phone with some of the respondents they agreed to share and distribute the link of the questionnaire to their friends, schoolmates and acquaintances who showed interest in

participating in the study. A third sampling strategy was used to get in to contact and organise the focus group. As in general qualitative techniques require a smaller and more precise sample a stratified random sampling strategy was used at this stage. The sample was collected from the teenagers who already completed the online questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The results and data analysis in this paper are presented in two parts. The first part is the quantitative data which is analysed using SPSS 26, in order to give a descriptive analysis, which shows the results in the form of percentages and histogram, with the aim to pinpoint the gender difference and preferences recorded in regards to teenagers' use of social media. The results collected from the questionnaire helped guide the planning process of the script for the focus group, which represents the second part of the analysis. The qualitative data collected from the focus group is analysed by using a thematic analysis technique following [12] method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The method of presentation of the collected results is to allow each technique to shine through and permit a final common analysis of the two. Meaning that the quantitative results are presented first followed by the qualitative ones. Concerning the quantitative data, a total of n=324 highschool students from the country of Suceava, between the ages of 15 to 19, have received the link and completed the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed using Google forms and the link was distributed through various social media and CMC platforms such as Facebook messaging and Whatsapp. When opening the survey, the teenagers, once they set their age, were met with an informed consent which either addressed them directly in the case where they were 18 or above, or their parents in case they were a minor. The parents and the older teens were asked to introduce their name and phone number to be contacted and were asked if they give their approval to participate in the following stages of the research. Out of the 324 teenagers who completed the survey 105 are male and 219 are female.

Teenagers engage with a plethora of activities in the digital space and the majority of them take place on various social media platforms. As there are an abundance of these types of platforms available for the youth, it was necessary to limit the variables to the most popular ones. There was also a curiosity to uncover if teens still have accounts on certain platforms. The results show that 99.1% of the respondents have at least one social media account and out of all the platforms (such as Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, Twitch and Instagram) the majority, meaning 97.2%, have a Facebook account with Instagram following close with 93.8%. What peaked and raised one's interest in these preferences is the fact that when asked which of these platforms did adolescents use most often, both male and female teenagers seem to have a strong preference for Instagram.

These results reappear also in Martin et al. (2018) where she also notices that the youth have a stronger preference for Instagram although they are still actively being present on other platforms as well. Some gender differences that have been observed concerning social media platform's preferences are noticeable when looking at the ones which are more focused on certain types of content. YouTube seems to be a lot more popular with the males than the females and also Twitch. These two platforms are associated with video type content and streaming while Facebook and especially Instagram are more photo orientated. Twitch is also associated with gaming content which is culturally related more as being a 'cisgendered, straight, white, and male' activity [13] (p.324). The results show that 2.9% males choose Twitch as their main platform while 0% of the females chose it, and 33.7% of males chose YouTube as their main platform while only 11.4% of females. This data does not necessarily coincide with the type of content both sexes are more inclined to produce as 82.1% stated that they usually post photos more than anything else, but it might be an indication in regards to the differences in the type of content male and female teens enjoy to consume. The data also indicates that females are more active in the production of digital content - at least when it comes to posting photos on Instagram - as 8.7% females and 3.8% males post daily, 16% females and 9.6% males once every couple of days, 20.1% of females and 11.5% of males post once a week.

One of the other focuses of this research was on the type of content male and female teenagers consume and if there are any identifiable differences. By analysing the existing data it can be noticed that both sexes have a high consumption of various types of content. Due to the difference in the numbers of male and female respondents it is difficult to state a clear analysis of the gendered content consumption. Yet one can argue that in some stereotypical categories, such as Fashion and Celebrity News, that subjects might be reluctant to answer or inclined to answer due to societal expectation. It might not come as a surprise that 88.5% of females answered that one of the regular content they consume is related to fashion or the 83% in regards to Celebrity News while only a small percentage of males chose those categories. Still it is interesting that when it comes to categories attributed to boys in regards to digital content, a high percentage of girls chose that as their answer. One of these categories, for example are Sport, Technology and Games, where although the percentage is lower in comparison to the males the difference is not very drastic. It is also worth taking in consideration the fact that the current social and cultural context in which this research transpires is considered to be quite conservatory and religious. Due to this, there are some concerns regarding the main themes of the research as the teenagers might adjust their answers to fit what is considered by them the pro-social requirements [14] [7]. Although this is the underlying concern, the existing result in regards to gender binary associations vary. The majority answered the questions as was estimated, but still the answers were quite dispersed. This raises several questions concerning the nature of these answers and whether there could be more underlying elements which were explored in the focus group session.

Gendered Online Content

The focus group invitation and informed consent was sent out for six teenagers - 3 boys and 3 girls - out of which 5 came through and agreed to participate. After viewing the two clips the respondents were asked to write down three words which would describe the word girl/boy, the content they just watched made by the boy/girl and the content made by girls and boys in general. The majority of words said by both girls and boys to describe girls are related mostly to physical traits related to their attractiveness, such as *beautiful* which was used multiple times, *cute, elegant, charismatic, sensitive* and elements of personality traits such as *understanding, kind, sensitive, temperamental* and *clever*. These words were afterwards discussed and as one of the boys put it *'girls put more soul into what they do'* and as another continued the idea *'that's why they call it the beautiful sex'*. When asked about the words they used to describe boys the majority of them were related to the physical aspects related to their prowess and ability such as *strong* - was mentioned the most often*, imposing, disciplined, intelligent* and *arrogant*. When asked if a girl cannot be strong or a boy beautiful, several participants answered that not in the same way. These traits are either not considered valuable or the meaning of strong or beautiful changes when it is associated with the opposite sex. Therefore, if we look at these statements from the perspective of Goffman's theory one can argue that teenagers' views of the other sex is highly infuenced by the social and cultural standing in which they are socialised and conditioned by the meaning they growup with. These attitudes are seen also in connection with the other two tasks. When they were asked about the YouTube clips they just watched both the boys and the girls describe the one made by the female as being *'unorganized with a script learned by heart', fast paced, thoughtless, nervous, hard to follow,* and *unattractive*. While the one made by the male was characterized as being *'structured, intelligent, researched, unscripted, well spoken, captivating* and *interesting*. The participants were asked if they had to do a school assignment on the subject presented in the two videos which one would they trust more in regards to the validity of the information that was presented, to which all of the respondents answered that they trusted the one made by the man. Two of the boys added that *'boys don't have so many feelings when it comes to speaking in front of others...meaning that girls are more emotional'*. In order to see the girls' perspective on this they were asked directly what their opinions in regards to these statements are, to which they answered *'the same'*. The last aspect discussed was in regards to content made by boys and girls in general. Concerning the words they used to describe the type of content boys and girls posted, they followed the same dichotomous pattern as the ones presented above. Meaning that if the girls' content is seen as being *'excessive, mainstream - the type of content everybody else posts they do as well, useless - they post pictures with food, competitive with each other, interesting* [and] *funny'*. The content posted by the boys is seen as being about *'cars and politics, indifferent, distracted, being silly, bragging ,uninteresting* [and] *funny'*. After a small discussion between the boys and the girls, it was concluded that both boys and girls tend to post content of themselves which is *'indecent'* when they post

pictures or videos of themselves with very little clothing on and in endearing poses. The focus group ended with a conversation regarding the impact COVID19 had on their internet intake. Although the teens said that they did not feel that they spend more time online during quarantine, they did state that they binged watched movies and TV shows on platforms such as Netflix more than usual and that they had to stay in front of a screen longer due to their classes being held on Zoom.

CONCLUSION

With each generation it is undeniable that the internet becomes present and indispensable from the early stages of a child's life. Due to that, so does the socialization process become more complex as the initial information in regards to the outside world is not limited just to the family anymore, but also includes the content consumed from social media. Meaning that the information they receive in relation to the appropriateness of certain behaviours are relative to one's biological sex and therefore the type of gender identity they should have. Both male and female teenagers use and rely in a way on the internet and social media in a daily manner. They use it to stay connected to their friends and express certain aspects of their gender identity. In a similar manner [14] discusses the aspects of how parents, the peer group and the media teach and socially adjusts teenagers in the molds in which they are expected to fit as males and females and conditioned and censored to do so. This was also visible during the focus groups as the girls adopted a more passive stance and resorted to answer presented in a non-confrontational manner which would oppose the views voiced by the boys. In a sense it is also seen in the type of content they consume as it tends to show some elements that could be defined as stereotypical and might not show the reality of the situation. Goffman also discusses this aspect when he refers to the fact that the individual portrays a version of themselves that they think will be accepted by their social group. In other words, while they are in the front stage, teens will present the type of behaviour they think it is expected of them from a gendered perspective, and while in the backstage they relax, reflect and as [14] puts it, might engage in activities which define them as being more androgynous.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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