

PEER-ING IN THE ONLINE MIRROR: ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS' DISCLOSURE AND MUTUAL VALIDATION IN PRESENTATIONS OF SELF ON SOCIAL MEDIA¹

MONICA BARBOVSCHI*
BIANCA BALEA**
ANCA VELICU***

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.

Keywords: self-presentation online, peer validation, online self-disclosure, adolescents, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence has been theorized as a period of increased insecurity related to one's identity, in which partial, temporary identities are formed (Bennet, 1999;

¹ This article was financially supported by the research grant UEFISCDI - PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-1726 – code 168 of 01/10/2015, financed by the Programme PN- II – Human Resources of the Romanian Government, sub-programme Research projects for stimulating the formation of young independent research teams.

* Associated researcher, Institute of Sociology, Bucharest; e-mail: moni.barbovski@gmail.com.

** Associated researcher, Institute of Sociology, Bucharest.

„*Revista română de sociologie*”, serie nouă, anul XXIX, nr. 3–4, p. 269–286, București, 2018



Creative Commons License
Attribution-NoDerivs CC BY-ND

Miles, Cliff, and Burr, 1998), with other people having a significant role in shaping them, in an iterative dynamic between privacy and sociability (Papacharissi and Gibson, 2011). Over the past decade, social network sites (SNSs) have become popular venues for young people connecting, communicating, and socializing, contributing majorly to processes of identity building and self-expression (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons, 2002; Livingstone, 2008) through continuously eliciting and incorporating peer feedback (Valkenburg and Peter, 2008). Notably, meeting the social and personal integrative needs is at the core of the gratifications young people obtain from social media, which accounts for the great appeal of the medium among young users (Taddicken and Jers, 2011).

As identity building is deeply relational (Valkenburg and Peter 2008), peers play a significant role in the adolescents' process of creating a coherent sense of self and self-image (Brown, 1990; Bukowski and Sippola, 2001). As Sonia Livingstone noted (2008), although at a declarative level young people's actions within their peer networks on social media are free and uninhibited, they do in fact reflect the constraints of norms and practices within the group as well as the technological affordances of the medium. Arguably, these constraints related to identity construction and expression shape the ways young people present themselves online. Peers cross-referencing each other and posting on each others' walls (e.g., tagging each other, giving *Likes*² to each other's posts) increase the status of profiles in a group of peers, in a mutually reinforcing, visible, relatively stable manner (Luders 2011; boyd, 2014). Nonetheless, there is no fixed self which gets projected onto a canvas of social interaction, but rather a process of folding and unfolding of the self on social media in a 'process of subjectivation' (Foucault, 1992) in which an individual engages with oneself and relates to others in a continuous process of building visibility, recognition, and esteem (Sauter, 2014; Van Krieken, 2012).

In this article, we build on several theoretical and analytical tools related to identity, self-presentation and impression management online for Romanian adolescents (13–14 and 15–18 years old), in order to reveal and discuss the dynamics of teens presenting themselves online and the mutually enforced peer constraints they experience on social media. We look at direct (self-) and indirect (other-perceived) constraints and reflect on the specific technical affordances of the media, as reflected in the young people's level of digital competencies. Drawing on a mixed methodology (qualitative and quantitative data collected between May 2016–March 2017), our study contributes to the research field on adolescents' self-presentation online through focusing on dynamics of friendship and mutual practices of validation on social media, taking into account distinct stages of adolescence and gender differences.

² Facebook allows for a series of reactions to other users' posts – in the form of *Liking*, *Comments* and more recently, reactions, such as *Heart*, signaling liking something a lot.

Romania provides an interesting context for research as an alternative to Western European studies. We follow the suggestion of Livingstone and Drotner (2011) to include cases of children's media cultures in other parts of the world, in an attempt to 'de-Westernise' research (Curran and Park, 2000) and counter universalistic assumptions about 'childhood' or 'media'. Furthermore, as a 'high use, high risk' and 'new use, new risk' country (Livingstone et al., 2011), Romania has seen the largest increase in social media use for adolescents, especially in the number of contacts on social media and use of publicly available profiles. Romania has shown the most dramatic growth of seven EU countries (from the EU Kids Online and Net Children Go Mobile projects) in social media use by young people 9 to 16 years old between 2011 and 2014, and has the highest number of young people with 100 + contacts, most of which have a public profile (Livingstone et al., 2014).

1. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

1.1. THE SELF AND THE ROLE OF PEERS IN THE CONTEXT OF ADOLESCENTS' SOCIAL NETWORKING

Throughout the history of studies dealing with online versus offline identity, the classic dichotomy between online and offline identity has been replaced with the idea of an 'always on' personal presence, where online and offline identity are deeply interwoven (Cover, 2015), since digital media has 'infiltrated' the core of every aspect of everyday life. Our analysis draws on studies which acknowledge identity as performative, namely Goffman ([1959], 2002), for discussing identity as being 'constituted in the reiterative performances of selfhood that produce, retroactively, the illusion of an inner identity core' (Cover, 2015, XIV, building on Butler's theories). Looking at identity as a project, always under construction, allows us to explain at the same time users' self-presentation and all the performances aimed at influencing others (Goffman [1959], 2002). Although Goffman's original study referred to face to face interaction, his theory is especially suitable for analyzing interaction on social network platforms, where rules and etiquettes are essential and even more so for analyzing young peoples interaction on these platforms, as performing differently in divers contexts allow them to learn about social world and rules (Buckingham, 2008). Moreover, this also explains the demand for a coherent identity, which leads to self- and other-surveillance (Cover, 2015) or to social image constraints, as named by Kramer and Haferkamp (2011), following the model of Leary and Kowalski (1990). We rely in our article on the concept of self-disclosure, as a process of 'divulging self-information to a single or multiple others (...) with the type of information shared ranging from factual to personal, private or intimate details about the self' (Attrill et al., 2011: 1634).

Previous research on the role of online communication for adolescents' experiences of friendship and identity (Davis, 2012) has revealed that communicating online with peers promotes adolescents' sense of belonging and self-disclosure, two important peer processes that support identity development during adolescence. Other empirical evidence suggests that communicating online with peers has a positive effect on the quality of adolescents' friendships (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2011; Valkenburg and Peter, 2009, 2011). According to a study conducted by Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais (2009), increased time spent on Facebook, higher need for popularity and lesser awareness of consequences increased the likelihood of disclosure for adolescents.

1.2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF ONLINE

In analysing our qualitative data, we took into account several analytical tools that dealt with strategies of creating specific images online – impression construction. First, we were persuaded by Leary and Kowalski's (1990) five variables that impact a person's impression construction as described by Kramer and Haferkamp (2011, 131–132), namely 1) the self-concept or the individual's perception of self; 2) the individual's desired identity; 3) specific role constraints within a social system, in the case of SNS including norms related to social behaviour online (e.g. how should one behave as a best friend, acquaintance, online contact, classmate etc.); 4) the current or potential social image – i.e., how a person thinks others currently or prospectively regard him/her, and finally 5) the target values – the anticipation of other people's values and adjusting the impressions in order to elicit desired reactions (Leary and Kowalski, 1990, see also the concept of 'packaging', Leary, 1995).

Moreover, we acknowledged Rettberg's (2017) three-parted model of self-representation in social-media, in which visual presentation (i.e. selfies and other images and icons that one posts online), written presentation (i.e. any blog comment or status update one writes on their own profile or on others' profiles), and quantitative presentation (i.e. any quantified description of a person, from sportive performances that are automatically shared by an app, to the number of *Likes* a post has or the number of friends) are to be found in online performance of self, sometimes overlapping.

Finally, we distinguish between two operating fields of performative identity on social media: one, related to profile management, the other related to the friends and the network, which further allows us to illustrate the iterative dynamics between self-presentation and the feedback/perceived input of others in a network of mutual surveillance (Cover, 2015). We note that if profile management is an attempt to maintain a coherent self-performance within the personal network, practices of others – such as tagging, commenting, 'disturbing' the past through bringing back old pictures – can be seen as 'disruptive', introducing multiple

co-existing identities (the others' representations of a person), through relinquishing some of the control one has over his/her own image.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The theoretical and analytical lenses were instrumental in developing our research framework and questions pertaining to the way adolescents construct and perform their identity online in the context of mutual peer surveillance on social media platforms. From the theoretical frameworks, we retained the ideas of performative and re-iterative identity online, which is interwoven with the offline identity; we further acknowledged the importance of online communication for promoting a sense of belonging (as a positive effect on the quality of adolescents' friendships) and self-disclosure (Subrahmanyam and Smahel, 2011; Valkenburg and Peter, 2009, 2011), which are in turn fostered by time spent on social networks with peers and the need for popularity (Christofides, Muise, and Desmarais, 2009). From the analytical frameworks (although noting they are not mutually exclusive), we used several elements which contribute to the dynamic of the performative online self: individual perception, desired identity, role constraints (including social norms), the potential social image (how one thinks they are perceived by others), and target values (as anticipation of people's values) (Leary and Kowalski, 1990), as well as the types of information which get sewn into the fabric of the online self, namely visual, written and quantifiable (e.g. number of *Likes*) information (Rettberg, 2017). Finally, the two dimensions of performative online identity (Cover, 2015) – the profile and the network – impacted by the practices of others in a mutual surveillance mechanism were taken into account in our research design.

Based on existing research, we put forth the following research questions (RQ) and hypotheses (H):

RQ1: How are the practices of self-disclosure and mutual validation between peers incorporated in the process of constructing and presenting one's self on social media?

RQ2: How do young people present themselves on social media and what are the self- and other-related constraints they display?

RQ3: Are there age and gender differences when it comes to self-disclosure and mutual validation practices on social media?

H3.1: Gender and age have a direct influence on the self-disclosure and validation practices.

RQ4: Are there any differences between the social media platforms when it comes to the practices of self-disclosure and mutual validation?

H4.1: The use of visual platforms (Instagram and Snapchat) has a direct influence on the self-disclosure and validation practices.

3. SAMPLE AND DATA COLLECTION

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. The project explores the meaning and quality of friendship for Romanian youth in the context of social media use and personal data misuse. 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 (Pasquier, 2008; Valkenburg and Peter, 2008) and taking into consideration the formal age restrictions for using social media (e.g. above 13 for using most social media outlets at the time the article was written). To address the research questions formulated above and following the sequential exploratory research design strategy (Creswell, 2003) of the Friends 2.0 project, the present study proposes to first explore our research questions based on the qualitative data and further expand and test the findings of the qualitative analysis using the quantitative data.

3.1. QUALITATIVE DATA

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. Drawing on Leary and Kowalski's (1990) work, using the *Nvivo* software, several themes (e.g. self-disclosure; perception about practices of self-disclosure; validation, mutual and one sided; perception about validation online) were discerned in order to analyse these interviews. We expected to find differences in the way children manage their self-image online among the 13–14 and 15–18 age groups. Also we were interested in gender differences within these age groups.

3.2. QUANTITATIVE DATA

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 ($SD=1.56$).

3.3. MEASURES

One of the main objectives of the Friends 2.0 project was to construct a tool that measures the quality of friendship for Romanian youth in the context of social

media use. Therefore, following the work of Ladd et al. (1996) and Bukowski et al. (1994), we developed a Friendship Quality Scale adapted for social media use on the basis of five dimensions: validation, self-disclosure, aid/help, conflict, and exclusivity. In total, 33 items were measured on a Likert-type scale with three response categories (1=Never; 2= Sometimes; 3= Often). Children were asked to answer the questions thinking about their best friend. The scale development and validation procedures suggested in literature were taken into consideration. The reliability and construct validity were tested by using Factor Analysis techniques with the SPSS software version 21.0. Parameter estimates lie within the acceptable range (i.e. Cronbach alpha values for each dimension $> .700$; KM0 measure of Sampling adequacy $>.800$; one factor extracted using Principal axis factoring method). Since the quantitative analysis is a follow-up of the qualitative findings, for the purposes of the present study only validation and self-disclosure dimensions will be described in *Table 1*.

Table 1

Self-disclosure and validation practices.

Self-disclosure practices (Alpha = .794, N = 7)
S1. When something bothers me I always talk to my friend.
S2. I trust I can tell my friend what interests me without fearing I will be judged.
S3. I feel free and comfortable to talk to my friend through text messages without fearing they might get public.
S4. When I have a personal problem, my friend talks to me at any time and for as long as I need.
S5. There are things I do only together with my friend.
S6. Sometimes I give my phone to my friend to see my conversations with other people.
S7. When something happens in my life, my friend is among the first to know.
Validation practices (Alpha = .710, N = 8)
V1. My friend says I am his/her friend.
V2. My friends say I am trustworthy.
V3. My friends say I am cool.
V4. My friend <i>Likes/</i> appreciates what I post on social network sites.
V5. My friend shares (on their wall) what I post on social network sites.
V6. My friend has a profile or a cover picture where I also appear.
V7. If my friend posts something, I check it out because I know from the start I will like it.
V8. I am interested in the events, posts, and articles my friend is interested in too.

In order to test for the hypotheses 3.1 and 4.1 formulated above, based on these dimensions two dependent variables were composed. Each one represents the average score that 13–18-year-olds made on a measure of self-disclosure and validation practices with a range of 1 (low level of self-disclosure/validation) to 3 (high level of self-disclosure/validation). See *Table 2* and *Table 3* for the means and standard deviations for each of the eight groups.

Table 2
Descriptives for self-disclosure score.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total	1102	2,49	0,43
Girls	560	2,65	0,37
Boys	542	2,32	0,43
13–14-year-olds	371	2,40	0,46
15–18-year-olds	731	2,53	0,41
Instagram users	760	2,58	0,39
Non-Instagram users	342	2,30	0,47
Snapchat Users	638	2,60	0,38
Non-Snapchat users	465	2,33	0,46

Table 3
Descriptives for validation score.

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total	1056	2,24	0,37
Girls	534	2,33	0,33
Boys	522	2,14	0,38
13–14-year-olds	353	2,20	0,38
15–18-year-olds	703	2,26	0,36
Instagram users	731	2,32	0,33
Non-Instagram users	325	2,06	0,39
Snapchat Users	614	2,35	0,31
Non-Snapchat users	442	2,09	0,39

4. RESULTS

4.1. SELF-PRESENTATION AND MUTUAL VALIDATION

RQ1: How are the practices of self-disclosure and mutual validation between peers incorporated in the process of constructing and presenting one's self on social media?

Some young people in our sample, boys and girls alike, show a great deal of awareness about the importance of the number of comments and *Likes*: 'I often upload a video and I receive about... in the beginning I used to receive 5–6 *Likes* per share and for pictures around 30, now I receive 140–150 *Likes* per pictures and for a normal share up to 20–25 *Likes*' (boys, 15–17, Cluj). It is especially the younger group (13–14-year-olds) who displays a meticulous self-management of their online presence, some even a high degree of confidence about their own personal capital online or competitiveness over popularity: 'there is a bit of competition between us, who gets the most *Likes*' (girls, 13–14, Bucharest).

The need for validation plays an important role in young people's creating

and curating of their self-image online; moreover, enforced reciprocal norms about appropriateness and mutual surveillance (Cover, 2015) set the field in which mechanisms of validation/invalidation are performed. Furthermore, the specific technical affordances of social media platforms (e.g. the *Likes*, the comments, and more recently, Facebook's 'reactions') offer a straightforward repertoire for communicating approval or disapproval, and finally, those said affordances are clearly linked to learned skills of social media literacy, which have a developmental trend, with older teenagers being more aware of both technical specificities and social rules of engagement (Livingstone, 2014). The act of self-monitoring and waiting for validations enforce one another: 'I mean, there are some pictures of yourself that you like, you look really good and you really want to put them on Facebook and you don't want to logout, you want to see in three minutes, how many *Likes* do you get? In a minute? How about in one hour?' (girls, 13–14, Cluj). They talk even of ritualised demands of mutual validation, for example sending each other private messages in the form of 'Like + Com' – *Like* and comments – followed by a *Heart* sign, to put the request in mild, innocent terms (girls, 13–14, Bucharest). The business transaction model of *Likes* is something that has changed in time, as girls mention: 'I was of a more tender age and I used to take everything to heart and for me the thing with the *Likes* was like a business (laughs). Maybe it's too much to call it that, but I was telling a friend "I give you one *Like* now, and you give me two back"' (girls, 13–14, Bucharest).

For some the *Likes* are important as they offer confirmation of what they do, of their activities and hobbies, another important route for building a positive self-image: 'I like to take pictures, like. I am a biker and a skater, and I usually post pictures with the longboard [...] and you feel good when you see that someone else appreciates what you like. And the *Likes* are not necessarily just a way to attract the person, to attract someone's attention' (boys, 1–17, Cluj). The social media architecture allows for instant notification of the *Likes* and comments, alerting one to the attention they raised, reiterating the surveillance and validation effects. In terms of controlling their self-image displays online, older adolescents report a tight control over tags in pictures: 'I have to control all the time, on Facebook and on Instagram as well, what tags appear on my profile and if it's ok or not to be tagged before, I mean someone tries to tag me and I get notified' (girls, 16–17, Bucharest)³.

4.2. RECIPROCAL MONITORING AND CONSTRAINTS

RQ2: How do young people present themselves on social media and what are the self- and other-related constraints they display?

Regarding mutually enforced rules, there is a perceived pressure towards reciprocity, as a combination of validating the content and/plus validating the

³ Facebook allows for controlling being tagged in pictures by allowing the user to pre-approve the tags of others.

person posting the content, although this pressure is felt less by older teenagers. Commenting on the pictures of others is a practice reserved for the circle of friends, proving a sense of social netiquette which they recognise they learnt in time and is embedded within perceived gender role differences. Girls especially feel the pressure of mutual validation and state that failing to oblige is a faux-pas: ‘Sometimes I give *Likes* when I like the picture, other times out of obligation. [...] I mean, for example, it’s my best friend, and even if I don’t like the picture at all, even if it’s ugly, I have to *Like* it.’ (girls, 13–14, Bucharest). Conversely, boys tend to find strategies which make complying to the game of mutual validation through *Likes*, especially in the case of couples behaviours, as easy as possible: ‘Usually I put them on “see first” and they stick directly in the News Feed and the first things that pop up are from that person and we give them *Likes* more easily’ (boys, 15–17, Cluj).

Another rule is the rule of uniformity and equal treatment of friends when it comes to tagging behaviours; if there are several friends in a picture and you tag one, you have to tag everyone: ‘it seems normal to me to tag everyone, or no one’ (boys, 13–14, Bucharest). There is also the ritual of tagging each other in common pictures at special events (girls, 13–14, Bucharest). Another rule of engagement is not bringing back old photos through *Likes* and comments. If for some young people the rule developed after the misuse of old images by a friend put him or her in a awkward public situation by confronting the current self with an older and uncomfortable one, therefore transforming them into a teasing target for others, *Liking* an old photo is unacceptable as it could be interpreted as an expression of romantic interest in that other person – the ‘*Liker*’ seeming too eager to display his or her interest (boys, 15–17, Bucharest): ‘I give *Likes*, yes, but not if it’s from autumn 1900 [...] and then she says “look at this guy, he’s checking my pictures”’ (boys, 13–14, Bucharest).

Nonetheless, despite the minute care young people show in curating their self-image online, a sense of lack of control over one’s image is transparent. As identity is built not only directly but also indirectly through others’ activities online – in the form of comments and likes (Cover, 2015) – young people expect a degree of lack of control, and sometimes no control, over their own self online, the publicness of their online identities being taken for granted. Male participant 1: ‘Nobody asked my permission for tagging me on a photo. If I don’t like the picture and I don’t want it on my timeline, I just untag it.’ Male participant 2: ‘Or you just delete it from your timeline. You don’t even have to untag’ (boys, 16–17, Bucharest). Consequently, they feel free to act in a similar non-consensual way, taking advantage sometimes of others’ lack of digital literacy: ‘She asked me to delete the picture because I don’t know what she didn’t like... left eyebrow from the right eye [laughter], and she asked me to delete it. And I said “OK, I will”. But I didn’t, I just untagged her and she didn’t see the picture anymore. She didn’t think the picture will stay’ (boys, 16–17, Bucharest).

4.3. DEVELOPMENTAL AND GENDER DIFFERENCES

RQ3: Are there age and gender differences with regards to self-disclosure and mutual validation practices on social media?

Some older adolescents, boys and girls alike (and from wealthier backgrounds) tend to be very critical towards self-disclosure of personal feelings and emotion online, seeing this behaviour not as a genuine need for empathy, but as attention-seeking behaviour, the subsequent reaction being to unfollow or block those who display it. Moreover, those who are critical of online self-disclosure behaviour tend to 'distinguish' (Bourdieu, 1984) themselves from those 'pathetic' people, that are seen as 'the others': younger children or elderly people, or people with a lower socioeconomic status: 'My dad comes from a village – I'm not ashamed to admit this – and somehow I befriended someone... two people from that village: one, a friend of mine with quite a good socioeconomic status, better than average, and a girl, who does not have one (N.A.: the child's understanding of SES). And that girl, whenever something upsets her, she always posts it on Facebook. And I saw friends who repost posts of friends of friends and it appeared on my wall. And it was something pathetic and I clicked to see who could post something like that. And I saw that people who usually *Like* things like these are from Sector 5–6 (N.A.: perceived as poorer areas in Bucharest, as related to Sector 1, where the school in which the interview took place was situated) – I come from there too, but...' (boys, 16–17, Bucharest).

Furthermore, older adolescents have a more ambiguous attitude towards collective identities that are taken on uncritically. On one hand, they reject and quickly unfollow any uncritical self-presentation and performative identity they perceive as problematic, such as the religious one: 'For example, there are the religious posts on Facebook, with "*Like* if you are on Jesus' side" and [...] I think it's absurd, or "Write Amen if you believe in Jesus". And then I see friends, well not friends, but acquaintances who write "Amen". And then I *Unfollow* until I no longer receive these posts' (boys, 16–17, Bucharest).

However, adolescents do construct themselves socially, developing a sense of community (Buckingham, 2008) but that is stripped off by any traditional meaning. Thus, most young people eagerly engage in popular practices online, such as answering to 'online challenges', enrolling therefore in stakeless collectivity (as opposed to meaningful collectivities, such as a religious or political one), as most of the time they don't know the official 'cause' that a challenge represented (e.g. even though they participated in Ice bucket challenge, they didn't know that the challenge was supposed to support Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). As a practice of 'distinction', we noticed the pressure they face not to be associated with the 'wrong' people, meaning those who are not accepted by their 'significant others' (Vygotsky, 1980), be that parents at a younger age, or peers later in adolescence (Pasquier, 2008). The 'wrong person' could take on different identities, based on

life-styles different from their own, racial differences, and, when it is about a girl, judgement on her morality and bad reputation. This pressure and the practices they develop accordingly (e.g. hiding the list of friends or relying on a huge number of friends among which the ‘wrong persons blend in’, as one of the boys reported), rely on two of the above mentioned constraints, namely social image and target values (Kramer and Haferkamp, 2011).

Younger girls also state the distinction between giving *Likes*, which can be dispensed in a more generous fashion, and *Hearts*, which are reserved for BFFs, that is to say other girls. The *Likes* frenzy and the chase for approval in the form of collecting *Likes* is manifested more in the 13–14 age range, and less by older teenagers, who display more selective validation practices, reserved for close connections: ‘I comment on the posts of close persons, I give *Likes* just to close persons, to boys I have already talked to and to people I have already gone out with in the past, but now I don’t talk to that much. I don’t really post and I don’t check who gives me *Likes*’ (girls, 15–17, Cluj). The rules of engagement require that boys show more self-restraint in vanity displays, as reported by boys in our study: ‘There’s a boy has more than one thousand *Likes*... and until he reached one thousand, he shared his picture every week. [...] Between 800 and 1 000, it’s hard to make another 200 *Likes*, if you don’t have friends to give them to you. So he was re-posting every week. And in several months he reached one thousand. [...] I find it a bit over the top.’ (boys, 17–18, Bucharest). Differences are further claimed by boys reporting not being bothered when tagged in a ‘bad picture’ as they are confident everyone would know the ‘reality’ is better than the projected misrepresented image: ‘Friends know me, they know how I am, so when they see a picture in which I look bad, they do not change their opinion of me. The good pictures are on my profile. But if I really dislike the picture, then I delete it, I don’t have to ask the person to delete it’ (boys, 16–17, Bucharest).

Gender differences in the need for self- and mutual validation online are apparent, with girls displaying a more acute need for validation on social media in the form of *Likes*, *Comments* and *Hearts*, Facebook’s ‘reactions’, which is not to imply that boys do not care at all. The differences are also stereotypically reinforced in young people’s discourse, with boys claiming girls care more about their image online. However, gender differences become irrelevant when the ‘professionalization’ of the image takes place (e.g. self-presentation related to ‘professional’ activities or hobbies which require exposure and visibility). In these cases, popularity as a supreme value is partially achieved ‘naturally’, as all pictures automatically receive 400 *Likes*. However, their popularity is also achieved through assiduous work of self-presentation, in which the popular kids can get away with questionable or blamable things.

H3.1: Gender and age have a direct influence on the self-disclosure and validation practices

The quantitative data confirmed some of the trends observed in our focus groups. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the amount of self-disclosure and validation practices. There was a positive correlation between the two variables, $r = 0.585$, $n = 1\,032$, $p < .001$. Overall, there was a strong, positive correlation between self-disclosure and validation practices: more self-disclosure practices generate more validation practices and vice versa. A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to examine the hypotheses questioning whether gender, age and network type influence the practices of self-disclosure and (mutual) validation for 13–18-year-olds. The test for normality, for all subsequent analyses, examining skewness and kurtosis values for the dependent variables within the groups of the categorical variables, indicated acceptable limits of ± 2 (Trochim and Donnelly, 2006; Field 2009; George and Mallery, 2010; Gravetter and Wallnau, 2014). However, the *Levene's F* test revealed that the homogeneity of variance assumption was not met ($p < .001$). As such, the *Welch's F* test was used (which does not assume the homogeneity of variance). An alpha level of .05 was used for all subsequent analyses.

As expected, there were statistically significant differences in regards to self-disclosure (*Welch's F* (1,1065) = 188.130, $p < .001$) and validation (*Welch's F* (1,1030) = 74.21, $p < .001$) scores between boys and girls, with girls reporting higher self-disclosure and validation levels. These differences hold even when age is taken into account (13–14 years old girls vs. boys; 15–18 years old girls vs. boys). When tested for differences based on age (dummy variable, 1 = 15–18 years old; 0 = 13–14 years old), the ANOVA analyses indicated significant differences of self-disclosure (*Welch's F* (1, 673.877) = 21.69, $p < .001$) and validation (*Welch's F* (1,681.35) = 7.195, $p < .001$) scores between younger children and older ones. However, if gender is considered, the analyses reveal that younger girls do not differ from older ones in terms of validation practices (*Welch's F* (1, 408.52) = 2.839, $p = .093$), proving that, for girl's validation practices are intrinsic to a friendship relationship and not practices linked to a development stage.

RQ4: Are there any differences related to platforms in the practices of self-disclosure and mutual validation on social media?

Self-presentation within the context of friendship and network is greatly shaped by the platform on which they act and the kind of gratifications they expect to receive (Taddicken and Jers, 2011). For example, the selectiveness of Instagram allows for more freedom in liking others' photos, whereas on Facebook the same practice becomes 'noise' for others: 'On Instagram, I follow only things that have a great potential that I will enjoy them; therefore, on Instagram, my entire news feed is *Liked*. On the contrary, on Facebook very few are liked, because they come from news pages and I don't *Like* them because I know this will appear on my friend's news and maybe they don't like this' (boys, 16–17, Bucharest).

Nevertheless, sometimes older children, especially boys, prize themselves in being as in-active as possible online – one even showed indignation when the

researcher suggested otherwise. Inactivity becomes a form of self-presentation, a way of being coherent sometimes with their own self-image, reinforced by peers: 'It's not necessarily shame, but I am simply not used to posting on social media, I mean the first picture I post to be a picture of myself? I don't know how to start, I think the majority would say "Wow! You posted something, what happened?!"' Everyone knows I do not post on Facebook' (boys, 16–17, Bucharest). Another reason for being rather passive consumers is their permanent awareness that everything that is written by them online can be used against them – '*verba volant scripta manent*'. However, the older group is more preoccupied with the impact of what they disclose on their future image, whereas younger one cares more about the impact their written opinion could have on their current relationships.

H4.1: Visual platforms (Instagram and Snapchat) have a direct influence on the self-disclosure and validation practices

As expected, there were statistically significant differences of self-disclosure and validation scores between those who are using Instagram or Snapchat networks and those who are not, as determined by several one-way ANOVA analyses (positive effect on self-disclosure and validation practices among adolescents). The differences remain significant when age and gender are taken into account, with older children and girls reporting more validation and self-disclosure practices. For the same reasons as discussed within the H1 hypothesis, we report on *Welch's F* test values.

Therefore, by using photo sharing platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, adolescents engage in more validation practices with their best friends (Instagram: *Welch's F* (1, 531.76) = 107.93, $p < .001$; Snapchat: *Welch's F* (1, 817.84) = 125.95, $p < .001$) and are more likely to disclose themselves to their best friends (Instagram: *Welch's F* (1, 555.94) = 90.32, $p < .001$; Snapchat: *Welch's F* (1, 877.36) = 106.62, $p < .001$).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

For adolescents, being seen by those who they wish to be seen by, and in the ways they wish to be seen, are key motivations for using social network sites (Oolo and Siibak, 2013). 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 self-presentation (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 this regard, we retain Cover's idea (2015) that we bear witness to an 'illusion' of an inner self created by repetitive performances as insightful. 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.

Finally, specific technical affordances offer very precise repertoires for communicating approval or disapproval according to the kind of gratifications they expect to receive (Taddicken and Jers, 2011), while affordances are clearly linked to learned skills of social media literacy, which have a developmental trend, e.g. older teenagers being more aware of both technical specificities and social rules of

engagement (Livingstone, 2014). We share the recent concerns related to image-based platforms as venues for adolescent developing anxiety and dissatisfaction with their bodies when comparing themselves with more attractive peers on Instagram or Snapchat (RSPH – YHM 2017). Adolescents in our study who use image-based platforms like Instagram or Snapchat are also in need for more validation from their peers and to share more of themselves with their friends.

Social media can act as effective platforms for positive self-expression, by letting young people experiment with different aspects of self, as well as display themselves and validate each other through specific mechanisms as put in place by technical affordances. Along the way, they learn to navigate the social norms, including pressures for mutual validation, on venues of mediated sociability. Our study offered a complex picture of these processes, embedded in different stages of adolescent development, and contributed to the body of research related to adolescent identity construction and presentation of self in the context of peer relationships as shaped by use of social media. We welcome further research addressing the long-term effects of engaging with performative identity on online peer networks as the adolescents of today transition into young adulthood.

REFERENCES

1. Attrill, A. and Jalil, R. (2011). Revealing only the superficial me: Exploring categorical self-disclosure online. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 27 (5), 1634–1642. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.02.001>.
2. Bargh, J.A., Mckenna, K. and Fitzsimons, G.M. (2002). Can you see the real me? Activation and expression of the “true self” on the internet. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(1): 33–48. DOI: 10.1111/1540-4560.00247.
3. Bauman, Z. (2016, January). Social media are a trap. *El Pais*. http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/01/19/inenglish/1453208692_424660.html
4. Bennet, A. (1999). Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste. *Journal of Sociology*, 33 (3): 599–617.
5. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
6. Boyd, D. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
7. Brown, B.B. (1990). Peer groups and peer cultures. In S.S. Feldman and G.R. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (171–196). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
8. Buckingham, D. (2008). Introducing identity. In D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, identity, and digital media* (1–24). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
9. Bukowski, W.M. and Sippola, L.K. (2001). Groups, individuals, and victimization: A view of the peer system. In J. Juvonen and S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (355–377). New York: Guilford Press.
10. Bukowski, William M., Betsy Hoza, and Michel Boivin. (1994). Measuring friendship quality during pre-and early adolescence: The development and psychometric properties of the Friendship Qualities Scale. *Journal of social and Personal Relationships* 11, no. 3: 471–484.
11. Christofides, E., Muise, A. and Desmarais, S. (2009). Information disclosure and control on Facebook: Are they two sides of the same coin or two different processes? *CyberPsychology*

- and Behavior*, 12: 341–345.
12. Cover, R. (2015). *Digital Identities. Creating and Communicating the Online Self*. London: Academic Press, Elsevier.
 13. Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
 14. Davis, K. (2012). Friendship 2.0: Adolescents' experiences of belonging and self-disclosure online. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35: 1527–1536. DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.02.013.
 15. Field, A. (2009). *Discovering statistics using SPSS*. London: SAGE.
 16. Foucault, M. (1992). *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
 17. George, D. and Mallery, M. (2010). *SPSS for Windows Step by Step: A Simple Guide and Reference, 17.0 update* (10a ed.). Boston: Pearson.
 18. Goffman, E. (2002). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. 1959. Garden City, NY.
 19. Gravetter, F. and Wallnau, L. (2014). *Essentials of statistics for the behavioral sciences* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
 20. Kramer N.C., Haferkamp, N. (2011) Online Self-Presentation: Balancing Privacy Concerns and Impression Construction on Social Networking Sites. In S. Trepte and L. Reinecke, (Eds.), *Privacy Online*. Springer Science and Business Media:131–132.
 21. Ladd, Gary W., Kochenderfer Becky J., and Coleman Cynthia C. (1996). Friendship quality as a predictor of young children's early school adjustment. *Child development* 67, no. 3: 1103–1118.
 22. Leary, M.R. (1995). *Self presentation: impression management and interpersonal behavior*. Brown and Benchmark, Madison.
 23. Leary, M.R. and Kowalski, R.M. (1990). Impression management: a literature review and two-component model. *Psychology Bulletin*, 107: 34–47.
 24. Lee, A. and Cook, P.S. (2015). The conditions of exposure and immediacy: internet surveillance and generation Y. *Journal of Sociology*, 51: 674–688. [http:// dx.doi.org/10.1177/1440783314522870](http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1440783314522870).
 25. Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New Media & Society*, 10(3): 393–411.
 26. Livingstone, S. (2014). Developing social media literacy: how children learn to interpret risky opportunities on social network sites. *Communications*, 39 (3): 283–303. ISSN 0341-2059.
 27. Livingstone, S., Mascheroni, G., Ólafsson, K. and Haddon, L. (2014). *Children's online risks and opportunities: Comparative findings from EU Kids Online and Net Children Go Mobile*. EU Kids Online reports. Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/sonialivingstone/eu-kids-online-net-children-go-mobile-comparative-report-2014>.
 28. Livingstone, S., Ólafsson, K. and Staksrud, E. (2011). *Social networking, age and privacy*. London, UK: EU Kids Online.
 29. Livingstone, Sonia and Drotner, Kirsten (2011) Children's media cultures in comparative perspective. In: Nightingale, Virginia (Ed.), *The Handbook of Media Audiences. Global media and communication handbook series (IAMCR)*. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK: 405–424. ISBN 9781405184182.
 30. Luders, M. (2011). Why and how online sociability became part and parcel of teenage life. In R. Burnett, M. Consalvo and C. Ess (Eds.), *The handbook of internet studies* (p. 452–469). Oxford: Blackwell.
 31. Miles S, Cliff, D. and Burr V. (1998). Fitting in and sticking out': consumption, consumer meanings and the construction of young people's identities. *Journal Youth Studies* 1998; 1: 81–96.
 32. Oolo, E. and Siibak, A. (2013). Performing for one's imagined audience: Social steganography and other privacy strategies of Estonian teens on networked publics. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 7 (1), article 1. DOI: 10.5817/CP2013-1-7.
 33. Papacharissi, Z. and Gibson, P.L. (2011) Fifteen minutes of privacy: Privacy, sociality, and publicity on social network sites. In Trepte S, Reinecke L, eds. *Privacy online: Perspectives on privacy and self-disclosure in the social web*. London: Springer: 75–89.

34. Pasquier D. (2008) From Parental Control to Peer Pressure: Cultural Transmission and Conformism. In Drotner K, Livingstone S, eds. *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture*. London: SAGE Publications, p. 448–459. Ltd. <http://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608436.n27>.
35. Rettberg, J.W. (2017). Self-Representation in Social Media. In J. Burgess, A. Marwick and T. Poell (Eds.), *SAGE Handbook of Social Media*. Sage.
36. Ringrose, J., and Rawlings, V. (2015). Posthuman performativity, gender and “school bullying”: Exploring the material-discursive intra-actions of skirts, hair, sluts, and poofs. *Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy and Politics*, 3 (2): 1–37.
37. Royal Society For Public Health and Young Health Movement (2017). *#Status of Mind report. Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing*. Available at: <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/social-media-and-young-people-s-mental-health-and-wellbeing.html>
38. Sauter, T. (2014). What’s on your mind? Writing on Facebook as a tool of self-formation. *New Media and Society*, 16(5): 823–839. DOI:10.1177/1461444813495160.
39. Shapiro, L.A.S. and Margolin, G. (2014). Growing Up Wired: Social Networking Sites and Adolescent Psychosocial Development. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 17 (1), 1–18. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s10567-013-0135-1>
40. Subrahmanyam, K. and Smahel, D. (2011). *Digital youth: The role of media in development*. New York: Springer.
41. Suler J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7: 321–326.
42. Taddicken, M. and Jers, C. (2011). The uses of privacy online: Trading a loss of privacy for social web gratifications? In S. Trepte & L. Reinecke (Eds.), *Privacy online: Perspectives on privacy and self-disclosure in the social web* (143–156). London: Springer.
43. Trochim, W.M. and Donnelly, J.P. (2006). *The research methods knowledge base* (3rd ed.). Cincinnati, OH: Atomic Dog.
44. Valkenburg P.M. and Peter J. (2008). Adolescents’ identity experiments on the internet: Consequences for social competence and self-concept unity. *Communication Research*, 35: 208–231.
45. Valkenburg, P.M. and Peter, J. (2009). Social consequences of the Internet for adolescents: a decade of research. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18 (1):1–5.
46. Valkenburg, P.M. and Peter, J. (2011). Online communication among adolescents: an integrated model of its attraction, opportunities, and risks. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 48 (2):121–127.
47. Van Krieken K. (2012). *Celebrity society*. New York: Routledge.
48. Vygotsky, L.S. (1980). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
49. Williams, M. (2007). Avatar watching: participant observation in graphical online environments. *Qualitative Research*, 7 (1): 5–24.