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Constructing the Self through the Photo selection - Visual Impression Management on Social Networking Websites

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Abstract

This article takes as a point of departure Erving Goffman's (1959) ideas and the self-discrepancy theory of Higgins (1987) in order to introduce the habits of self-presentation of young people in the online environments. The aim of my article is to examine the reasons for joining SNS and the aspects young people would hope to emphasize on their profile images in social networking sites (SNS). I also focus on the qualities that are considered to be crucial by the 11 to 18-year-olds in order to become popular among their peers in the online community. The analysis is based on the findings of a questionnaire survey carried out in comprehensive schools in Estonia among 11 to 18-year-old pupils (N= 713). The results show that motives with a distinctly social focus dominate among the reasons for creating a profile in SNS. However, visible gender differences occur in the reasons for selecting particular profile images. The findings reveal that girls creating their visual self value both the aesthetic, emotional, self-reflecting as well as aesthetic-symbolical aspects of photographing more than their male counterparts. Furthermore, visual impression management in SNS varies according to the expectations of the reference group at hand, as the profile images of the young are constructed and re-constructed based on the values associated with "the ideal self" or "the ought self".

Key words: Social networking sites, profile images, self-presentation, identity, Estonia

Introduction

Social networking sites are quite new phenomena; however their popularity and influence is constantly growing. Millions of people use social networking sites such as MySpace, Friendster, and FaceBook daily in order to present themselves, communicate with friends and entertain themselves looking at the profiles of others. Social networking sites are foremost meant for interaction, either for strengthening the ties between off-line friends or building connections with new people. Anyone can become a member of these sites by simply completing the profile, i.e. answering questions about their personality, tastes, interests, preferences, and sometimes adding photo(s), etc. Aside from the global social networking sites such as MySpace and FaceBook there are also sites that are mostly inside one region, i.e. meant to connect people with common language or nationality (e.g. Rate in Estonia, Face in

Latvia, Point in Lithuania, Lunastrom in Sweden), common geographical background (Blacksburg Electronic Village), professional background (LinkedIn), etc. .

The study of social networking sites has been a growing area of research during the last few years. Previous researchers have analyzed the social networking sites as a phenomenon (Donath & boyd, 2004; Snyder, Carpenter, & Slauson, 2006; boyd & Heer, 2006; Fragoso, 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2007; Subrahmanyam & Greefield, 2008), presentation of the self on social networking sites (Marwick, 2005; boyd & Heer, 2006; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Zarghooni, 2007; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008), social networking sites as virtual ways for collecting social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008), and trust and privacy concerns (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Preibusch, Hoser, Gürses, & Berendt, 2006; Stutzman, 2006; Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Hodge, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). Most of the studies, however, have focused on the biggest and most famous social networking sites like MySpace (boyd, 2006; Perkel, 2006; Hodge, 2006; Snyder et al., 2006; Dwyer, 2007; Zarghooni, 2007), Facebook (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006, Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) and Orkut (Fragoso, 2006) or comparisons between these sites (Dwyer et al., 2007).

Although social networking sites are global phenomena, less research has focused on social networking sites that are more language-and-national-identity-specific (e.g. Siibak, 2007a; Siibak, 2007b; Sveningsson, 2006). Furthermore, although there has been studies about the building of profiles on the social networking sites, the research has mainly dealt with the textual parts of the profile (Sveningsson, 2006; Liu, 2007; Evans, Gosling, & Carroll, 2008) or peoples' willingness to share private information on their respective profiles (Hodge, 2006; Preibusch et al., 2006; Stutzman, 2007; Dwyer et al., 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2007;). There are only a few studies focusing on the photos of users that are made to accompany the profile (Kapoor, Konstan, & Terveen, 2005; Siibak, 2006, 2007a, 2007b; Watson, Smith, & Driver, 2006; Krämer & Winter, 2008; Mikkola, Oinas, & Kumpulainen, 2008; Strano, 2008). Nevertheless, several of these authors (Siibak, 2007a; Young, 2008; Mikkola, Oinas, & Kumpulainen, 2008) have declared that the visual material gives important additional information about the identity of the profile owner. Therefore, it is especially important to consider what kind of aspects the young themselves choose for their visual impression management as well as what kind of aspects are worthy of portraying in the hopes of gaining popularity among the peer-group.

The aim of the present article is to analyze what kind of profile images are chosen for self-presentations for the most popular social networking site in Estonia, rate.ee. A questionnaire survey was carried out by 11-18-year-old users of the site in order to study their main reasons having a profile in rate.ee, as well as to analyze what kind of aspects the young people considered important to present on their profile images. Based on the assessment of youngsters, the article also analyzes the aspects they consider crucial for becoming popular among the other users of the SNS and gives an overview of those aspects redeemed as second-rate in terms of popularity.

Impression management in online environments

Just as in the case of face-to-face communication, people communicating online are also always trying to obtain information about each other, in order to be able to know in advance what to expect and what kind of response to give. Erving Goffman (1959/1990) was the first to emphasize the importance of impression management, i.e. people often engage in activities

in order "to convey an impression to others which it is in their interests to convey" (Goffman, 1990, p. 4). People are interested in controlling the impressions they are about to convey to the others, so they could be consciously or unconsciously calculating their actions and behaviours. According to Goffman (1990), impressions are formed through interpreting two kinds of "sign activity": the expression given and the expression given off. The former is expressed during verbal communication; the latter through one's looks in general. In order to ascertain what kind of qualities and features are sought by potential partners, a person may have to "perform" several acts before receiving the approval they were looking for. Furthermore, Goffman (1990) states that individuals tend to accentuate and suppress certain aspects of the self, depending on the context of the situation. Whenever others are present, people tend to accentuate these aspects of the self that typically correspond to norms and ideals of the group the person belongs to, or wishes to belong to. We are constantly monitoring the self in order to earn the approval of others, and to give positive impressions of ourselves.

Identity management, however, needs a lot of work, especially in the case that the norms and expectations of the society or important others differ from our own. These differences between the various types of self-beliefs or self-state perceptions were formed into a self-discrepancy theory by E. Tory Higgins (1987, 1989). According to Higgins (1987, p. 320-21) we have three types of self-domains: (1) *the actual self*, which is one's representation of the attributes that are believed (by oneself or another) to be possessed by an individual; (2) *the ideal self*, which is one's representation of the attributes that someone (either oneself or another) would like one to possess; and (3) *the ought self*, which refers to the attributes that someone (oneself or another) believes one should possess. One's own perspective on the actual-self can also be viewed as the self concept. Other self-state representations, such as one's own hopes and wishes for the self (ideal-self) or the duties or obligations that are presumed to be held by one's significant others for the self (ought-self), provide important goals, standards, or self guides for self-regulation.

The virtual space of the Internet has given people extraordinary freedom for experimenting with these different self-domains. Young people are especially keen on "testing" these various aspects of their identity on the Internet (Vybiral, Šmahel, & Divinova, 2004, p. 173). Therefore, it is even claimed that online communities have turned into "identity workshops" (Bruckman, 1992 cited in Roberts & Parks 2001, p. 268) where people can construct and re-construct their different self-domains. Theorists (Petkova, 2006), however, have even noted that in the new media environments people may easily switch from the 'real' to the chosen 'ought' identity. Therefore, when communicating online the impression management is formulated into an "ever-present worry of needing to perform oneself appropriately, and the twin need to be constantly evaluated as acceptable, or simply okay, in the context of one's peers" (Clark, 2005, p. 217). These different "performances" need to be modified according to the received feedback, so that the messages given off could be read out as impressions the person was trying to convey.

Profile images as tools for visual impression management

Aside from the opportunity to fill in textual templates on most of the SNS, people can also add their photos to their profiles in order to serve a very specific role in the online self-presentation context. Based on their study of self-presentation in online-dating environment Ellison, Heino and Gibbs (2006) claim that the photographs used on the profile "served to warrant or support claims made in textual descriptions", i.e. people used photographs not only

to visualize their looks, but also to emphasize the things and qualities that were important for them. Therefore Ellison et al. suggest (2006) that a photo of a man posing without a shirt on and another photo of the same man standing in front of the wall where his diplomas are displayed, function on many levels. On the one hand the photos are supporting the discursive claims made in the textual part of the profile; on the other hand they are giving an overview of a person's self-concept and physical characteristics. Still, as photos may be staged performances it is often quite hard to capture whether the photos presented are actually "representation of behaviours or a re-presentation of them (boyd, 2006). Nevertheless, research (Ellison et al., 2006) has confirmed that people are very conscious of their selection of photos and even the different poses and behaviours they are portraying on them are formed according to the "set of rules" which are also used for assessing the photos of others.

Monica T. Whitty (2007) has also investigated photos people use to accompany their online dating-website profiles. Her qualitative study among the online-dating site users revealed that "people experimented with what photos and descriptions of themselves would be more successful at attracting others to their profile"(2007, p. 1715). Furthermore, the participants believed that "the need to present a good physical image of themselves was more important than any other characteristic" (2007, p. 1714). In order to show themselves from the most flattering viewpoint, some of the online-dating site users had a glamour-shot to accompany their textual profiles.

Similar tendencies are reported concerning the photo selection criteria among the SNS users. For example, the study by Michele Strano (2008) among the Facebook users showed that people are foremost interested in choosing photos for Facebook that they themselves would classify as attractive. Selecting photos where the owner of the profile could be viewed as having fun, or photos that were taken as a humorous shot were also often chosen. Other reasons like portraying their romantic relationship, showing special friendships or family relations were less often mentioned.

Kirsty Young's study (2008) also confirms the idea that in order to present oneself in online environments people often tend to select photos where they look as good as possible. In her online survey among the 18-25 year old Australian youngsters (N=752) the analysis of the qualitative answers given revealed that there were seven factors influencing the choice of photos to accompany one's SNS profile. According to Young (2008) the youngsters preferred to choose photos where they would either look good or that would project a desired image of themselves. Photos that would represent an occasion or where significant other/friends were included on the photo were also popular. Some justified their choice in photos with convenience; others were interested in maintaining some anonymity. Photos with no image of the profile owner were also selected usually in order to portray the person as a fan of something (e.g. TV shows, cartoons, etc.). All in all, Young's findings allow her to postulate that the choice of the accompanying photo is "more often than not, a conscious and purposeful decision" (2008, p. 9).

Furthermore, based on the results of the online survey among of 13-15-year-old Finnish SNS "IRC-Galley" users (N=9930) Mikkola et al. (2008, p. 5) state that "young people express things that are important to them with their photos". The analysis of photos showed that youngsters are interested in posing together with important others, e.g., family member or friends, as well as to display their hobbies and pets. However, the researchers also encountered photos that portrayed the youngsters "in a pose that reminded images seen in the media" (2008, p. 5).

I start my analysis by giving an overview of the reason why Estonian youth created a profile in the most popular SNS in Estonia Rate. Then I proceed with analysing the aspects that young Estonians consider important when choosing photos to accompany their SNS profiles. Finally, I compare these answers to the aspects that the youth consider crucial in order to become popular among the users of the SNS as well as what aspects are redeemed as second-rate in terms of popularity.

Methods and data

The article is based on the questionnaire survey carried out 11-to-18-year-old students in comprehensive schools with Estonian as the language of instruction in three cities in Estonia (Tallinn, Tartu and Pärnu) in autumn 2007 (N=713). The distribution of students by level of schooling was as follows: 34% in grades 6-7 (mean age 12.6 years), 32% in grades 8-9 (mean age 14.6 years), and 34% in grades 10-11 (mean age 16.5 years). There were 357 (50.1%) of boys and 353 (49.5%) of girls in the sample. The sampled schools included primary schools and high-schools, public schools and private schools, schools with a larger number of students as well as schools with a smaller student body, and more and less prestigious schools in terms of the assumed quality of instruction and the level of competition for entering the school. Due to limited resources, it was not possible to draw a fully representative sample of the student population in Estonia; by selecting the schools according to the afore-mentioned stratifying criteria we, however, attained the sample that represents Estonian-speaking urban student population reasonably well.

The questionnaire included 316 indicators, among them the measures of students' online activities, attitudes and opinions on the Internet, self-evaluated computer and Internet skills, and command of English. In the present article I focus on Estonian youth who have constructed profiles in the SNS Rate in order to analyse their ideas about visual self presentation on the website. The available indicators enable me to analyse what types of aspects students consider important while choosing the photos for their SNS profile and what qualities are thought to be crucial in order to become popular among the SNS community members. Students could select as many answers as they viewed adequate when naming the aspects they considered important while selecting the photos for their profiles. A five-point scale was used, ranging from "very important" to "not at all important" for rating the characteristics needed for gaining popularity.

Results

Reasons for joining the SNS Rate

Most all Estonian schoolchildren, aged 11 to 18, use the Internet: in our sample, 99% of the students spend at least some time on their typical days online (Kalmus, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Runnel & Siibak 2009). A total of 70% of the respondents were engaged in SNS Rate, 57% of the pupils used the website actively. 60% of the respondents claimed to update their profile information and photos. Table 1 gives an overview of the reasons for creating a profile in Rate.

Table 1: Reasons for creating a profile in SNS Rate (%) (1, N=442)

Reasons for creating a profile in rate.ee	Girls (N=262)	Boys (N=180)	Pearson Chi Square	Sig.
My friends already had profiles	65.3%	69.4%	.842	ns
Wanted to find new friends/acquaintances	63.0%	43.9%	15.721	.000
Wanted to see what kind of people use rate.ee	42.4%	30.0%	.697	.008
Wanted to get to know people who share my interests and hobbies	39.3%	21.7%	15.237	.000
Wanted to know what other people thought of me	28.6%	23.3%	1.536	ns
Wanted to show myself	20.6%	16.7%	1.087	ns

Wanted to find a girlfriend/ boyfriend	11.1%	21.1%	8.367	.004
Wanted to rate others	7.6%	9.4%	.456	ns
"If you are not in rate.ee then you do not exist!"	4.2%	7.8%	2.56	ns

The main reason for creating a profile in rate.ee for both boys (69.4 %) and girls (65.3%) was initiated by the fact that friends already had their profile up on the site. Furthermore, motives with a distinctly social focus dominate among the reasons for creating a profile in the SNS especially in case of the girls (63% of the girls in the sample wanted to find new friends and acquaintances, 39.3% wanted to get to know people who share their interests and hobbies). The differences between genders in these aspects were also statistically significant. Differences between genders were also statistically significant when naming the possibility to find a girlfriend/boyfriend as a motivating aspect for creating a profile. Compared to the girls (11.1%), boys (21.1%) named the above mentioned reason for joining rate.ee more often. Evaluating and giving comments to others, i.e. taking part of the main activities of the site, were however not regarded as the primary reasons for joining the website by either gender (7.6% girls and 9.4% boys).

Selection of photos for a SNS profile

Table 2 gives an overview of the aspects that youth consider important when selecting photos to accompany their SNS profiles. The 12-17-year-old youngsters consider good looks the most important aspect when choosing the photo for their SNS profile. 56% of the girls and 31% of the boys believe that looking good on the photo is the main element one has to pay attention to while choosing photos to accompany one's SNS profile.

Table 2: Aspects considered important when selecting photos for a SNS profile among girls and boys (%) (4, N=442)

Aspects considered important when selecting photos for a SNS profile image	Girls (N=262)	Boys (N=180)	Pearson Chi Square	Sig.
I look good in the photo	56.1%	31.1%	45.125	.000
Photo is taken in beautiful surroundings	47.6%	20.7%	57.013	.000
Photo looks good in general	41.1%	16.0%	54.977	.000
My friends/family/acquaintances accompany me in the photo	39.1%	14.8%	53.068	.000
Photo commemorates an important moment in my life	39.1%	14.8%	53.068	.000
Photo reflects my personality	38.0%	14.8%	50.233	.000
Good photo-processing	32.3%	16.8%	23.013	.000
Important objects/things in the photo	28.9%	12.9%	27.573	.000
Interesting activity shown in the photo	28.6%	19.6%	7.870	.005
Photo describes my lifestyle	15.9%	18.2%	.689	ns
My clothing is trendy	15.3%	11.8%	1.894	ns
What kind of clothing-style I like	15.0%	13.4%	.358	ns
Photo is taken in a famous place	13.9%	7.6%	7.412	.006
Photo is taken by a famous photographer	12.5%	6.7%	6.757	.009
What kind of brands I prefer	5.1%	6.2%	.377	ns

Although both genders feel a need to upload a photo that is taken in beautiful surroundings (girls 47.6%, boys 20.7%), that would commemorate an important event like graduation, wedding, etc. in one's life (girls 39.1%, boys 14.8%) or where significant others (friends, family, acquaintances) are accompanying the profile owner on the photo (girls 39.1%, boys 14.8%) the abovementioned aspects are far more important for the girls than for the male counterparts as the differences between genders are all statistically significant.

Girls also value highly photos that reflect their personality (38%), the aspect of which is only modestly valued by the boys (14.8%). Young men, nevertheless, are slightly more interested in selecting photos that would describe their lifestyle (18.2%) than girls (15.9%). However, the difference between the genders in this question is not statistically important. The practical aspects e.g. good photo processing and fame of the photographer influences the photo selection of the girls more than for the boys. Clothing and brands, however, are considered least important while selecting one's own photos for the SNS by either of the sexes.

The analysis of the answers shows that girls are much more conscious of their selection of photos on the profile. They value both the aesthetic (e.g. beautiful surroundings, photo has a nice look in general), emotional (e.g. important moment, "important others"), self reflectory (e.g. photo reflects my essence, describes my lifestyle), as well as aesthetic-symbolical (good photo-processing, famous photographer) aspects of photographing more than their male counterparts while creating their virtual self. Young men, on the other hand, seem only mildly interested in choosing photos where their handsome looks are portrayed.

Expectations of the virtual peer group

In the survey we asked the youngsters what qualities and aspects a person needs to have in order to become popular among other SNS users. The answers presented in Table 3 reflect what 11-18 year-olds believe to be valued and treasured qualities among the peer group

Table 3: Aspects girls and boys consider important/very important in order to become popular among the users of the SNS (%) (4, N=442)

	Girls (N=262)	Boys (N=180)	Pearson Chi Square	Sig.
1. Good looks	84.5%	78.8%	10.250	.036
2. Photoshop editing	75.6%	67.4 %	14.386	.006
3. Large social network	72.1%	65.9 %	5.197	ns
4. Large fame	71.4%	63.0 %	13.111	.011
5. Points given by other users	71.3%	65.7 %	6.171	ns
6. Trend conscious clothing	70.1%	70.2 %	9.511	.050
7. Sexiness	66.1%	74.3 %	12.500	.014
8. Fame outside Rate network	64.3%	55.7 %	9.252	ns

The analyses of the youngsters` answers suggest 79% of the boys and 85% of girls believe that a person foremost has to be good-looking in order to become popular among one`s virtual network. Nevertheless, having just good looks is not always enough, the young believe as 74% of boys and 66% of girls think a person should also look sexy in order to gain popularity among one`s peer group. Trend conscious clothing is also viewed as a necessary component of popularity by both of the sexes.

When leaving aside one`s physical qualities and the content of one`s cupboard, the great impact of photo processing on becoming popular is admitted by 76% of the girls. Boys are not that eager to confirm the influence a Photoshop could have on their popularity as 67% consider photo editing to be important in order to become popular.

Both of the genders (72% of the girls and 65% boys) equally support the idea that the popularity among one`s peers in SNS can be gained if one has large enough network to begin with. Number of friends one has in one`s friends list is correlated to the popularity of the person on the SNS. Therefore having hundreds of friends is believed to be a highly valuable asset by the young. Furthermore, being friends with "the right people", e.g. people who have already made their way to the popularity charts, would also lead to one`s rise in the SNS hierarchy, believe 71% of the girls and 63% of the boys.

Least important influencers of popularity in SNS

Table 4 underlines the aspects that are considered by the target age group the least important influences on popularity. The findings show that for instance, education does not play any role in becoming popular in SNS as both genders regard it as the least important influence on popularity. Belonging to communities also does not play any role in the popularity of the person. Although the youth consider belonging to the communities as a forms of self-expression - possibility to "show myself the way I am" (43%), to be different, to share wisdom or humor, these types of self-expressions are not recognized as important by the

peers. Furthermore, all the other types of creative self-expression that can be performed on the site are also redeemed as second-rate in terms of popularity. For example, both the interests and the character type of a person as well as the additional information a person gives about his or her self on the website actually have a minor importance to the popularity. Also the nicknames, often described as the cornerstones of the virtual identity, are not regarded as important factors on the road to popularity.

Table 4: Aspects considered least important influencers of popularity among genders (%)

	Girls (N=262)	Boys (N=180)	Pearson Chi Square	Sig.
1. Education	13.4%	20.1%	13.345	.010
2. Belonging to communities	26.5%	27.5%	7.241	ns
3. Active commenting	28.8%	34.2%	4.671	ns
4. Interests	31.9%	41.2%	20.533	.000
5. Interesting nickname	36.1%	38.0%	4.922	ns
6. Character type	37.7%	33.8%	10.073	.039
7. Self introduction	43.5%	49.5%	8.669	ns

Although great fame in the network and various social contacts are viewed as crucial in order to become popular, the youth believe that active participation in the network is not actually required when one wants to become popular. Therefore, active commenting on the profiles of other users and various other forms of activities young people can engage in on the website do not necessarily add to popularity of the person.

Discussion

My results show that young people often join SNS for social reasons, either they feel pressured by their friends who already have the profiles in SNS or they are interested in finding new friends and even possible boyfriends or girlfriends. The results of the study confirm the findings of other studies focusing on visual self presentation online (cf. Ellison et al., 2007; Young, 2008, Whitty, 2008), suggesting that young people are very conscious and strategic in their visual self-presentation on SNS and carefully select the photos to accompany their respective profiles. Furthermore, the findings allow postulation that the youth also have very clear expectations of the aspects and qualities a person must have in order to become popular among the SNS users. Thus, they have adopted “the sense of the game” (Bourdieu, 1992), which Anthony King (2000, 419) has interpreted as “a sense of one’s relations with other individuals and what those individuals will regard as tolerable”. In other words, previous knowledge of the expectations and norms of the reference group is a necessity for a successful “performance” (Goffman, 1990).

Solomon (1999, p. 71) has claimed that “we hold ourselves to a standard defined by others that is constantly changing“. Thus, young people also struggle to find ways to leave a positive impression of themselves to as large an audience as possible. Favourable impressions however, can only be created when we manage to assume what the others are expecting from us. Furthermore, different people have different expectations and ideas about how a positive impression could be formed in their eyes. For example, adults and teenagers are generally impressed by different things thus, in order find out what kind of qualities and aspects are approved by our reference group, “everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role“(Robert Ezra Park, 1950, p. 249 cited in Goffman 1990, p. 19). Keeping this in mind, I assume that while the youth were naming the aspects they consider important to show on their photos, they were consciously or unconsciously taking the view point of adults, as the compilers of the survey, into account and tried their best to form favorable impressions of themselves. When emphasising the need to select photos that would display important moments in their lives, portray their personality or where they appear

together with important others, the youth seem to have tried to create their “ideal self” (Higgins 1987) taken from the point of view of important others (e.g. parents).

This “ideal self”, especially in case of the girls, seems to be built upon the self-beliefs, norms and values that are associated with the traditional female gender role. The girls were especially keen on emphasising that they consider almost all the proposed elements from the survey important while choosing their photos. More girls than boys in my sample emphasised the need to look beautiful on the photos, the finding of which coincides with a number of other studies (e.g. Strano, 2008; Whitty, 2008). The reason for this could be explained by stereotypical gender roles as beauty norms have always existed in case of women. However, in case of men, the topic has entered the public discourse only recently mainly through the commercial images of a “millennial man” (cf. Briggs, 2007). A need to stress their soft feminine values as the core of their essence could also motivate the girls in preferring to choose photos that are taken in beautiful places or where interesting activities are portrayed. The girls’ interest in selecting photos where the profile owner is accompanied by important others however, could be associated with girl’s need to “focus more strongly on the construction of the group identity in online contexts” as Strano (2008) proposed. Furthermore, the girls could have also viewed all these above-mentioned aspects as the “right thing” to say in the hopes of creating the “social ideal self” (Cooley, 1902).

Boys, on the contrary, appear to be much more lax about the choices they supposedly make for their SNS profiles. These gender-related discrepancies have been explained by socialization differences, as females are said to develop stronger self-other contingencies than are males (Higgins, 1991). It has been claimed that because of this sex-typed socialization process, girls may develop an orientation to regulate toward the guides of significant others whereas boys may develop an orientation to regulate toward their own self-regulatory guides (Cross & Madson, 1997; Hoffman, 1973, 1977).

Virtual peer groups, however, act as “important others” whose expectations, are taken into account when naming the aspects and qualities that would lead to popularity in SNS. I propose that while doing so, the youth tried to create the “ought selves” i.e. represent the attributes they believed people should or ought to possess in order to become popular among the SNS users (Higgins, 1987). The answers given reflect the differences between the reference groups according to whose expectations the youngsters have tried to model themselves. Beautiful looks, sexiness and trend-conscious clothing were considered important in order to form favourable impressions in the eyes of one’s peers. Rather than portraying one’s essence or posing in beautiful places, one’s trendy and sexy appearance “ought” to be exhibited when striving to be popular among the youngsters using SNS.

These conclusions can only be made with the respect to the sample studied. Hence, it is possible, that in the case of a larger sample, different conclusions could be drawn. The data for the present article was collected by the means of a survey which was carried out in the form of a paper-and-pen questionnaire during one academic hour in the sampled school classes. As all the pupils present in the class at the time of the survey had to fulfill the questionnaire, they might have feel pressured and constrained by the academic atmosphere and not as relaxed as in the case of an anonymous online survey. An online survey with its self-selected sample could thus have brought different results.

In the future, qualitative studies are needed in order to get a more thorough understanding of the visual impression management of youngsters on SNS. Furthermore, aside from looking at

the gender differences in visual self-presentation strategies, age-related differences could also be an interesting topic for future research.

All in all, the results of the present study give a reason to postulate that people cannot overcome the importance of presenting oneself in a physically favourable manner, even in the online environments (e.g. SNS, dating websites) that were first considered to be “faceless”. Angela Thomas (2007) has proposed that in online communities a new type of a body is created. A person’s nickname, net speak and textual profiles on SNS, all of which could be viewed as the cornerstones of the textual online identity, however, are considered less important than the visual parts of this so-called virtual body. Although the need to stress one’s physical appearance could be expected in case of dating websites, the need to select the photos that are considered attractive by the profile owners themselves emphasises the role visual impression management plays in all kinds of online environments.

Nevertheless, the impression management in the online worlds varies according to the expectations of the reference group at hand. Young people combine different self-beliefs and expectations of important others, i.e. grownups or peers, in order to form positive impressions about oneself. The virtual selves exhibited on the photos of SNS are therefore constantly constructed and re-constructed based on the values associated with the “ideal self” or “the ought self”.

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