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‘Looking like my favourite Barbie’ – Online Gender Construction of Tween Girls in Estonia and in Sweden

Andra Siibak* & Patrik Hernwall

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse how tween girls in Estonia and in Sweden describe and discover their gender identities when selecting profile images for social networking sites (SNSs). To this end, interviews with tweens in Estonia (N=21) and in Sweden (N=31) were carried out. As SNSs largely exist without the recognisable surveillance of adults, children can explore the social matrix of relating to others, and they also feel safe to try out and display different constructions and reconstructions of their identity. At the same time, in communicating online, impression management is formulated with constant worry about how to construct one’s virtual identity so that it will be appreciated and accepted by one’s peer group. In this article, our analysis focuses on the most popular posing strategies used by tween girls, which, it turns out, are often marked by reproduction of the dominant heterosexual cultural norms and values.

Keywords: tweens, SNS, gender, identity.

Introduction

It has been stated that “Online spaces are framed by a kind of compulsory individuality, as the ‘freedom’ to express oneself becomes a requirement, which then allows identities to be managed and regulated” (Willett 2008: 56). Our interest in online spaces, in particular social networking sites (SNSs), is related to the fact that contemporary young people are very actively engaged on these online platforms; 62% of 9-16 year olds across Europe report using SNSs (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson 2011: 36). Moreover, young people are said to consider these SNSs “‘their’ space, visible to the peer group more than to adult surveillance” (Livingstone 2008: 396). Following this line of reasoning, tweens (age 10 to 14 years old) engaging in SNS profiling can explore the social matrix of relating to others through trying out and displaying different constructions and reconstructions of their identity. In other words, when writing their identities into being in online communities, the young actively take part in producing the peer cultures that are created in these public spaces. The aim of this article is to analyse how tween girls in Estonia and in Sweden—that is, countries that differ in terms of historical and cultural background but that have many similarities in terms of Internet penetration rate and general online practices among their youth (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson 2011)—describe their gender identities when selecting profile images for publication on an SNS. Interviews with tweens in Estonia (N=21) and in Sweden (N=31) were carried out to study the visual self-presentation strategies used. We also consider the study important for deepening our overall understanding of the peer cultures formed on SNSs and the heteronormative power structures that help to shape the self-presentation methods practiced by tweens on those sites.

In the first part of the article, the digital generation concept is used to give a brief overview of the main Internet usage habits among Swedish and Estonian youth, and we end the theoretical background by describing the peculiarities of gender identity construction in the new media. The article

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then moves on to describe the methodology of the empirical study. In the last part of the article, we describe the practices that the girls use for constructing their gender identities through SNS profile images and analyse the findings from the peer tween perspective.

Theoretical overview

Estonian and Swedish youth as members of the digital generation

Each contemporary generation grows up with its own specific style of media usage and culture, which helps to differentiate that generation from previous ones (Schäffer 2003). Compared with the members of previous generations, who grew up in a world without (ubiquitous) digital technologies, present-day young people are often defined by their relationship to technology and the new media in particular. Hence, a variety of labels like ‘digital generation’ (Papert 1996), ‘Net generation’ (Tapscott 1998), ‘digital natives’ (Prensky 2001), and ‘electronic generation’ (Buckingham 2002), etc., have been used to signify the preferences and common characteristics of this new generation.

However, that distinction in digital stratification and motives for Internet use cannot be explained by the supposed generational differences alone, because these are dependent on numerous other things, including various individual-level factors such as personality traits, socio-demographic variables, individual resources, and factors related to habitus and lifestyle. Hence, a number of authors (Zimic 2010, Siibak 2009a, Herring 2008, Buckingham 2006) have problematised the labels and characterisations used for describing contemporary youth. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that present-day young people grow up in a dramatically different (media) society compared with what it was only a few decades ago. The findings of a recent survey among 9-16 year olds in 25 European countries suggest that four in every five children in Estonia and Sweden use the Internet daily, indicating that these youths can truly be seen as the rightful members of the digital generation (Livingstone *et al.* 2011: 32). In Sweden and in Denmark, the average age that children start to use the Internet is seven, closely followed by Estonia and several other Nordic countries, where the average age is eight (Livingstone *et al.* 2011: 31). This means that many children start to use computers and the Internet at an even earlier age, especially if they have access to information and communication technologies both within and outside of home settings (Findahl 2010).

In terms of their favourite online activities, research evidence suggests that young people use the Internet mostly as an educational resource, for entertainment, games and fun, for seeking global information, and for social networking (Hasebrink *et al.* 2008: 25). Moreover, it has been claimed that the members of the digital generation are no longer just passive consumers, readers or users of online content but are often the driving force behind user-led content creation, for example blogs, various creativity websites like Flickr and YouTube, and SNSs (Lenhart & Madden 2007, Bruns 2006). The latter can even be regarded as one of the most popular means of online communication for young people, as 59% of all 9-16 year olds across Europe report having their own SNS profile. In some countries, e.g. Estonia (71%) and Sweden (67%), the youth are even more frequent SNS users (Livingstone *et al.* 2011: 44).

Writing oneself into being on an SNS

The popularity of SNSs among tweens and adolescents can be explained not only by the fact that the sites offer the convergence of such previously separate activities as e-mail, downloading videos or music, blogs, and photo albums, and thus offer more opportunity for self-expression, socialisation, and creativity, but also, according to Livingstone (2008: 394), “Creating and networking online content is becoming an integral means of managing one’s identity, lifestyle and social relations”. Tweens

interacting in web communities, in general, and writing their identity on SNS platforms, in particular, are thus using as well as formulating the positioning categories of gender, race, age, etc. In other words, the above mentioned power differentials and identity markers are experienced, expressed and reconstructed in an ongoing process in the production of an online identity

Consequently, when 'writing the self into being' (boyd 2008) on an SNS, i.e. while constructing one's SNS profile, a multimodal deliberate action is being performed which includes one or more such textual levels as written text, images, sound, graphic style, and layout, as well as different textual elements, hyperlinks, intertextual remarks, etc. This semiotically rich (Kress 2009) 'body-self' (Hernwall 2009) is presented and made publicly available on the SNS. The notion of 'the body' is in this perspective a construction in constant negotiation, and is given its meaning in a social and historical context. As the young people are in this intertwined process of being and becoming (Prout 2005), they consume a wide range of mediated expressions on how to look, how to relate to the body, how to take care of the body, etc. This gendered identity is a relational identity (Hall 1996), open for re-negotiations and re-writing. In other words, seen as a way of communication, the body-self is used as a 'narrative project of the self' (Pitts 2003: 31) for developing a personal identity.

Creating a gender identity online

Gender, as the socially constructed dimension of the inextricable dualism sex/gender (Lykke 2010), is something that is created not just by norms and values, but also by actions, histories, experiences and prejudices. In this process, gender is both done and undone in gendering/ degendering practices (Deutsch 2007). This continuous process of gender identity construction is ubiquitous in the sense that it takes place in both human-human and human-nonhuman (Barad 2008) encounters. The interactions between young people on SNSs are not an exception either.

It has been claimed (Walker 2001) that people often use gender scripts for self-narratives "So that identities and processes of identification occur within the social networks and power relations that are most familiar in society" (Walker 2001, referred to by Thiel 2005: 187). Hence, despite the fact that one is allowed to create the identity of one's choice in virtual environments, studies have shown that men and women still tend to offer attributes that are thought to be sought after by the opposite sex and that are also in accordance with heteronormative values (Nakamura 2002, Albright 2001, Schmidt & Buss 1996). In other words, it is as usual on the Internet as in the offline world that "Females and males 'perform' what they interpret their gender to be based upon, what culture has taught them is the correct (heterosexual) interpretation of gender" (2005: 182). For instance, Bordo (2003) the images of those who are beautiful and worth striving for are communicated by different kinds of media construct norms and values as to how one should look and behave. These theoretical assumptions are complemented by Siibak's (2007) empirical study analysing who is voted most beautiful on an Estonian youth SNS called *Rate*.¹ Her later works (Siibak 2009a, 2009b) indicate that rather than experimenting with totally new identity constructs, the youth on *Rate* construct identities that are highly influenced by the media and the advertising industry. These findings imply that every body-self on an SNS is a reflection of existent norms and values in the contemporary culture that are carried forward by the present-day media (Mikkola, Oinas & Kumpulainen 2009, Strano 2008). In this regard, identity should be seen as fluid and varied, a phenomenon that is unstable and nomadic (Kennedy 2006, Braidotti 1994). Thus, social identity can be seen as part of a multidimensional and relational whole that is prominent in a certain situation (Hall 1996). It is also important to note that the presented identity is often an intentional response to the pervasive challenges posed by present-day society to create and interpret oneself (Willett 2008, Holm Sørensen 2001) as well as the body-self. Consequently, identity is written in a semiotically rich mode (Kress 2009), in a constant re-negotiation (or dialogue) with the intertwining of personal experiences, subjective motifs and societal/cultural expectations.

1 *Rate.ee* started out as an Estonian speaking equivalent to 'Hot or Not', revolving around voting and rating of the most beautiful friends, users and celebrities.

Methodology and data

First of all, we need to stress that our aim was not to carry out a comparative study wherein we analyse the differences and similarities in the visual self-presentation strategies used by Estonian and Swedish tweens. One of the reasons for not conducting a comparative study was the difference in site rules and photo-uploading regulations set by the service providers of *Bilddagboken* and *Rate*, favourite SNSs amongst the respondents in our study. In other words, we believe that the technological and regulatory differences between the two SNS environments would also have an impact on the ways the users construct and re-construct their (gendered) identities. Therefore, our aim was rather to deepen our understanding of the ways in which the tweens create their gender identities through SNS profile images. In both countries, the informants were asked to reflect upon their own visual self-presentation choices in online communities and to comment on the self-presentation trends that they perceived to be prevalent online. These perceptions of tweens about posing strategies and girls' photo selection in creating SNS profile images are analysed in the present article.

The two separate empirical studies were conducted from October 2009 to March 2010. In the autumn of 2009, the method of focus-group interviews (in all 9 interview sessions) was used to interview 10-14 year old SNS users (N=31) in Sweden. In spring 2010, semi-structured single-informant interviews were carried out with 10-12 year old users (N=21) of the SNS *Rate* in Estonia.

In Estonia, the respondents were found by using the snowball sampling method. If the tween agreed to take part of the study, the parents were notified, informed both about the content of the questions and the aim of the study and asked to give written permission before the interviews were carried out. In Sweden, interviews were conducted in two different (middle and upper primary) schools during school hours. Permission was granted and the parents informed by the school.

The socio-demographical factors taken into account when compiling the sample were age and gender. As this study does not aim to compare the opinions and experiences of Estonian and Swedish youth, the composition of the samples was secondary to the quality of the data collected. In other words, we have adapted the data collection strategies according to the different conditions met in the respective countries, with the general aim of finding the voices from within. Our overall ambition has been to find the authentic voices of the young.

The style of the interviews was based on a qualitative interview technique, building on a flexible outline of topics and questions (Patton 2002). A pre-prepared interview schedule with open-ended questions was used to help guide the interviews. The length of the interviews varied, ranging from half an hour to slightly over an hour. The tweens were also encouraged to demonstrate their SNS profile images as available in their mobile phones during the interviews. This opportunity was used by respondents in both countries.

All of the interviews were transcribed and the transcripts processed by means of cross-case analysis, the main idea of which is to force the researcher "To go beyond the initial impressions, especially through the use of structured and diverse lenses on the data" (Eisenhardt 1989: 541) and by doing so enhance the probability of coming across novel findings. Extracts from the interviews are provided to illustrate the analysis.

We fully acknowledge the two notable methodological limitations of this study. First, that even though the interview method allowed us to study the self-reported perceptions of the informants, we could only rely on the findings of our previous studies (Siibak 2009a, Siibak & Ugur 2010) when evaluating the actual self-presentation practices of the tweens online. Nevertheless, we believe that the subjective understanding of the interviewees is interesting, as such, and should be regarded as one of the most important dimensions in deepening our understanding of how gender identities are constructed on an SNS. Second, and this is perhaps more important, our relatively small and homogeneous sample did not allow us to differentiate between the informants based on their socio-

Table 1: Age and gender of the respondents. The Swedish interviews were group interviews, the Estonian semi-structured individual interviews

Age	10	11	12	13	14	Total
Girls Ee	3	5	5	0	0	13
Boys Ee	2	3	3	0	0	8
Girls Se	8		6			14
Boys Se	4		3		10	17
	17	8	17	0	10	52

Source: authors' compilation

demographic background, ethnicity, etc. Despite the above-mentioned limitations, however, the study provides a unique overview of the pre-teens' perceptions of girls' visual gender identity constructions on Estonian and Swedish SNSs.

Results

The analysis of the interviews has resulted in three interconnected categories: *Reproduction of norms and values*, *Popular posing strategies for the girls* and *Manipulation of images*. In short, our findings indicate that the majority of the posing strategies adopted by the girls are inspired by existent gendered norms and values. However, our data also includes a few examples that show traces of alternative ways of identity construction, or practices of undoing gender.

Reproduction of norms and values

Peer culture and its impact on SNS social interaction has turned the SNS into an arena where power structures are constructed and negotiated. The interviews with Estonian and Swedish youth suggest that there certainly is a very conscious decision behind what photos to use for presenting oneself on an SNS. In this process, “power differentials and identity markers” (Lykke 2010: 31) play a prominent role, as the user is aware of the presence of the judging eye (Mulvey 1975).

I upload those profile images that will catch the eye of the others, even if only for a while. I take a look at the photos first in order to see if there are images where I look the way I want to look. Normal, I mean. There are so many images that sometimes it is quite difficult to find a photo that I really would like to upload. (Girl, 10, EE)

... one has to choose the best ones [images]. (Interview1, Boy1, 14, SE)

As noted by others (Siibak 2009b, Strano 2008), the findings of the present study also indicate that the tweens are foremost interested in choosing profile images that they themselves would classify as attractive. To be more exact, the ‘best’ images, according to the perception of these young people, are those where the person in the photo can be described as ‘cute’.

In Rate, I upload the photos that I myself like the most. I have one photo where I have light-coloured extensions, pouting my lips suspiciously and wearing a pink top. Actually it looks very fierce, a bit like my

favourite Barbie. Those light-coloured extensions and pink clothing make me so cute. Cute-meter is through the roof. And that is also the reason why I chose this photo, because it's the most normal from all my photos; at least I liked it the most. (Girl, 11, EE)

The interviews with our respondents give us reason to believe that the tweens are very much aware of the expectations of their virtual peer group and well familiar with the visual trends on the sites. For example, in the case of the SNS *Rate*, the interviewees have perceived that the self-presentation strategies of the high-ranking users in different popularity charts (e.g. 'TOP 100 of the most remarkable men and women in *Rate*', 'TOP 100 of the most famous users', 'TOP 100 of the most popular dates', etc.) help to shape and form the peer group norms and values prevalent on the site.

It seems that someone with feim² is imitated because the photos are similar. I think that there are a lot of photos where girls are posing with a duck-face.³ (Girl, 12, EE)

The findings of our study also give us reason to believe that the youth are well aware of the features and aspects that need to be emphasised on the photos in order to gain positive feedback from the other users. Furthermore, the tweens have also acquired the necessary skills to pose and behave in their images, 'Like my favourite Barbie,' as one of our respondents described it. In striving to be accepted among online peers, however, the youth are simultaneously reproducing norms and values in relation to the construction of beauty and gender and its intersection with the construction of age.

Popular posing strategies for the girls

Reproduction of gendered norms and values is most frequently encountered when studying the most popular posing strategies used by the girls. Interviews with these youth in Estonia and in Sweden indicate that they have detected gender-specific ways of posing in the images selected to be uploaded on their SNS profile. It was also noted that some of the most popular posing strategies used by the girls allow and even demand creativity. For instance, it is common to find photos of girls with face paintings (e.g. cat, tiger, etc.) in profile images on *Rate* and *Bilddaboken*, whereas similar self-representation styles are not to be found on the images of boys.

*I think that there are very many photos in *Rate* where there is just the face of a person visible. And photos where eyeliner has been used to draw a cat's whiskers and nose on the face.* (Girl, 11, EE)

The girl in the citation above is speaking about posing strategies among young girls, mirroring a culture where girls/women are supposed to take care of how they look, to be attractive, 'to-be-looked-at' as phrased by Mulvey (1975), i.e. showing their presumed 'femininity'. The latter trend was also eagerly interpreted by our respondents when describing the images that *Rate* users perceived to lead to popularity. For instance, according to their perceptions, the typical images in *Rate* reflect vanity, as profile owners often take the chance to pose either with expensive accessories or with sexy looks and trendy clothing. Our Estonian respondents seem to share the opinion that the profile images of girls that can be described as sexy and provocative receive more flattering comments as well as more positive attention from male users of the site. Hence, the interviewees have noticed that young girls on the site try to gain attention by exhibiting their sexuality, e.g. by emphasising their breasts, pouting their lips or by wearing provocative clothing.

² *Rate* users who have the highest popularity ranking among the community.

³ A common facial expression visible on the SNS images when the person on the image is pouting her lips to appear sexy.

The usual Rate photo definitely shows vanity. Someone is either posing off or flaunting some expensive thing. There are a lot of sexy photos. Photos definitely need to be sexy in order to catch the eye. Girls who pose in a provocative manner are more popular, of course. (Girl, 12, EE)

The most popular photos must be those where girls are skimpily dressed with their boobs pushed up. (Girl, 10, EE)

Notably, the above-mentioned posing strategies seem to be less common in the Swedish context, judging by the descriptions given by the Swedish youth. On the contrary, rather than trying out the posing strategies described above, the Swedish tweens seemed to take a rather critical stand against profile images of this kind. One reason for this among the younger girls is the influence of parents, both as adopted value systems and as being able to login to *Bilddagboken*:

Sure, my mother wants me to look pretty on photos, but... (Girl, 10, SE)

Just a few years later, for the 12 year olds, for example, peer culture is just as important of a guide as the parents' views were earlier for the 10 year olds in terms of how to look and behave online. It is possible that the differences in judgments are caused by differences in how the studies were conducted. For instance, at the time of the interviews, the Swedish youth, who were interviewed in their school setting and in groups (whereas the Estonian youth where interviewed one by one), might have felt more like students in the classroom rather than pictured themselves as SNS users.

However, the differences in opinions about posing strategies may also be related to the fact that the main aims of the two SNSs described by our respondents vary a lot. *Rate* is based on rating the images uploaded on the site (even though its focus may have shifted/widened), while *Bilddagboken* can be compared to a photo diary/blog, with a much wider range of photos accepted by the SNS administrators. Still, the influence of the norms and values dominant in the society as a whole cannot be underestimated, since it definitely helps shape the youth's understanding as well as the practices they engage in while constructing gendered identities online. In this context it is noteworthy to mark that the overall status of gender equality in Sweden usually ranks high in international studies compared to Estonia that holds a considerably lower ranking (Plantenga Remery, Figueiredo, & Smith 2009).

Manipulation of images

As the construction of gendered norms is an ongoing project, the manipulation of images to be published as an SNS profile can be regarded as a part of this gendering project. We suggest that there are two possible instances of manipulating the images to be published online. First of all, the manipulation of the object to be photographed can be done simply by the pose taken in front of the camera. The other option, however, demands the skill of 'photoshopping' or post-production of the photo taken, i.e. where the user changes the original photograph in one way or another. Hence, it should be seen as a complex multimodal textuality that takes advantage of a broad semiotic palette (Kress 2009).

Previous research (Siibak 2009b) suggests that the young people consider photo manipulation to be a crucial skill in order to raise peer group popularity. The same idea was expressed by respondents who confessed to 'tuning the photos' to make the profile owner appear to be 'more beautiful and cool' (Girl, 10, EE).

Our interviews with the tweens indicate that the girls do not hesitate to use photo editing software to manipulate the photos so as to present themselves in a more favourable light. For example, it was expressed that it is common to cut some people out of the photos, or, when it is allowed by the administrators of the SNS (as is the case with *Bilddagboken*, but not *Rate*), to add (or reduce) colours, shades, graphical elements, and so on.

First, I definitely take a look at myself and how I look. Then at who else is in the photo. Other stuff is not that important, if this is my profile, I need to look good. How else could it work? Well, I don't upload a photo with some geeks on it. Or when some bitch is around. So I generally cut out the unnecessary things and upload a photo where I am dominating. (Girl, 10, EE)

Photo manipulation skills are surely developing with age (that is, along with broader experience). Even more noteworthy, however, is the fact that this skill seems to be gendered, as it is primarily girls and far more seldom boys who practice it (Hernwall 2010). The latter tend to use photo manipulation tools just for the fun of it and not with the intention of publishing the photos in online communities, whereas the girls are both more interested in the activity as well as more experienced in using the tools.

Boy1: *They [girls] edit*

Boy2: *Yes, THEY edit*

Boy3: *Black-and-white sometimes*

Boy1: *... it is more girls than boys who take photos that are provocative.* (Interview3, Boys, 14, SE)

Consequently, there seems to be an interplay between young girls, developing a specific set of skills and knowledge (seldom found among the boys) on the one hand, while on the other hand, in the development of these skills the girls are also doing gender work, re-constructing societal norms and values upholding hierarchical gendered (and aged) positions. In other words, by making use of the opportunities offered by photo manipulation, young girls are actively constructing, co-constructing and re-constructing the gendered body 'in the empire of images' as phrased by Bordo (2003). Furthermore, in manipulating images that are to be published on the SNS, the girls seem to construct a kind of knowledge that is shared and developed amongst the users of the SNS community. For instance, our Estonian respondents claim that it is quite common to request help for using photo processing tools from more experienced friends and other *Rate* users. In the latter case, significant 'thank you' notes are often seen either on the profile images or as comments under the photos.

Discussion and conclusions

The prevalent posing trends among young girls described by the Estonian and the Swedish tweens in our study correspond to the previous findings of Hernwall (2009) and Siibak (2010, 2009a, b) on the analysis of images published on SNSs. On the one hand, young female SNS users try to combine the markers of their personal everyday lifestyle (e.g. hobbies, interests, choice of clothing and accessories) when constructing their visual self-representations. In that case, the profile images can be viewed as creative personifications of a profile owner, with an emphasis on the aspects that the person considers important or characteristic of him or herself. On the other hand, similar to the findings of Mikkola *et al.* (2008), who studied visual self-presentation on the Finish SNS *IRC-Gallery*, the representations of females in our contemporary media culture (Bordo 2003) serve as significant role models for the tween girls posing for and manipulating the images to be uploaded on SNSs. As the girls often try to imitate the posing strategies and facial expressions seen in traditional media, the photos used for visual self-representation can be perceived as a reflection of the social ambiguities, especially about maturity and gender, that young women daily encounter. For example, as the images of women in Estonian media have been 'linked to a trivialising beauty cult' (Põldsaar 2000), the descriptions of the most frequent self-representation strategies used by Estonian girls on SNSs seem to reproduce the stereotypical power relations and beliefs about the gender order in the society as a whole.

The influence of peer culture is one of the main sources of inspiration for the youth in their creation or writing of the online body-self. Looking for acceptance from one's peers is an important driving force behind the social interaction on SNSs, as with any other social interaction. When writing their identity on an SNS, young girls not only direct their interaction towards the others present in the community, but also towards themselves and the construction of their identity. Our findings indicate, for example, that in the case of constructing and reconstructing gendered identities, being 'cute' is considered to be an important aspect forming the overall value standard among young girls. Even though the importance and role of 'cute cultural capital' (Hjorth 2009: 7) has so far been discussed in the context of social media and mobile phone communities in Japan, the present findings suggest that the 'cute culture' (Hjorth 2009) phenomena is worthy of further investigation also within the European context.

Our findings allow us to claim that for the girls on the brink to adolescence, the possibility of constructing and reconstructing the appearance of the body-self on an SNS allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the norms and values of the contemporary society in which they are growing up. Despite their young age, these interviewees pay attention to cultural norms and values on gender and, hence, these power differentials and identity markers are also reproduced in their SNS interaction. The reproduction of norms and values is visible in the manipulated images, as according to the perceptions of the interviewees the girls seem to have greater interest and knowledge in the post-production of images. One important dimension of this gender work, however, is the fact that the girls develop a specific digital competence seldom mentioned by (or seen among) the boys. Although significant differences in self-evaluated computer skills among boys and girls have been found in both Estonia (Kalmus 2006) and in Sweden (Zimic 2010), our present findings do not reinforce the age-old gender stereotype about women as less-skilled users of the new media. Rather, when writing their identity on an SNS, both Estonian and Swedish girls create their social relational identity as a continuous result of multimodal strategies and the competencies (Kress 2009) they have acquired.

However, a number of questions can still be posed for further studies. For instance, could one's action of writing an identity on an SNS lead to the replacement of the markers of normative femininity such as passivity, quietness and acquiescence by new markers of ideal femininity among the tweens (e.g. self-assertiveness, self-confidence, sexual subjectivity, individualism and independence)? Or in other words, should we view the girl/woman producer (Bruns 2006) as an agent with the potential to challenge heteronormative norms, or are there a set of markers of ideal femininity that are nonnegotiable (Bettis & Adams 2008)? Does the active use of SNSs have an emancipatory potential as suggested by Haraway (1991) among others, or is SNS use framed within a cybertype (Nakamura 2002) leaving little or no room for challenging societal power structures? These are some areas that require further study. Taking this into consideration, it would be of great value to follow a group of young people in a longitudinal study, to observe how these gendered identities grow (and hopefully get challenged). Future research should also consider the interplay between the so-called online and offline worlds in relation to how gender is done among youth. Here it would also be possible to take a more active role as researcher, by practicing action research and by organising workshops with young people to study the possibilities of challenging present norms by using the affordances of the SNS to overcome the positioning of the physical body.

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