

Teens, Gender, and Self-Presentation in Social Media

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Abstract

This article is concerned with how teenage boys and girls present themselves through online social media such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and chat forums. Based on research conducted mostly in the United States, it describes and considers the implications of social media use, profile construction, visual and textual self-presentation, profile visibility, truthfulness, and other facets of teens' self-presentation in relation to their gender.

Introduction

Teenagers – young people between the ages of 13 and 19 years – have been identified as the generation with the highest Internet use since the late 1990s (Kraut et al., 1998). As 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) who were born and raised in the age of computers and online communication, today's teens share self-created content, post their opinions, and link to other content online more than any other demographic group (Lenhart et al., 2010). The often-heralded democratizing potential of the Internet (e.g., Ess, 1996) has been realized especially strikingly for youth: at no other time in history have young people enjoyed such opportunity to make themselves visible to, and heard by, diverse audiences. At the same time, this exposure entails risks. Moreover, there are gender differences in teens' Internet use, as will be discussed below. Unless otherwise specified, the claims in this article pertain to English-speaking young people in the United States, about whom the bulk of research on online behavior has been conducted.

This article is concerned with how adolescent boys and girls present themselves to others through online social media. Social media are Web-based (and increasingly, mobile) services that allow users to connect and interact with friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Examples include social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, media-sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr, blogs, and other Web-based communication forums. Social media "build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and ... allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: p. 61).

Much of that content is photographs, links, and textual information that social media users post to present an online self. Self-presentation is generally considered to be motivated by a desire to make a favorable impression on others, or an impression that corresponds to one's ideals. As such, self-presentation is centrally involved in impression management and the projection of an online identity (cf Schlenker, 1980). Research has shown that teens' online self-presentations differ in various ways, projecting gendered identities.

The term gender is used here to refer to the socially constructed roles that individuals adopt and present to others. Gender normatively maps onto biological sex, and we use the terms *boys* and *girls* to refer to the normative mappings, albeit with the caveats that (1) it is often difficult to determine an

Internet user's actual biological sex or offline gender and (2) gender and sex exist along a continuum, and intermediate realizations of both are possible. The following sections describe teenagers' social media use, profile construction, visual and textual self-presentation, profile visibility, truthfulness, and other facets of self-presentation in social media sites in relation to normative gender. The article concludes by discussing the implications of these findings and the future outlook they suggest.

Social Media Use

Teens as a demographic group are avid Internet and social media users in the United States. A recent survey found that almost all U.S. teens (95%) aged 12 through 17 years are online, compared to only 78% of adults. Of these teens, 80% have profiles on social media sites, as compared to only 64% of the online population aged 30 years and older (Lenhart et al., 2011). According to a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, individuals of 11–18 years of age spend on average over 1.5 h per day using a computer and 27 min per day visiting social network sites, more than one-fourth of their daily computer use (Rideout et al., 2010).

At the same time, because of their inexperience, limited capacity for self-regulation, and susceptibility to peer pressure, teens may not fully understand the possible repercussions of Internet use and are at some risk as they navigate and experiment with social media (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Concerns have been expressed about the amount of time teens spend online (cf Gross, 2004), (lack of) parental control over teenage Internet use (Wang et al., 2005), privacy, risky behaviors such as sexting, cyberbullying, 'Facebook depression,' and exposure to inappropriate content (O'Keeffe and Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Yet other scholars have critiqued the tendency for the mass media and some scholars to fuel 'moral panics' regarding youth online (boyd, 2007; Herring, 2007), pointing out that the incidence of harm to teens resulting from Internet use is actually very low. Moreover, a survey conducted by Wang et al. (2005) suggests that parental awareness of and involvement with their children's Internet use are increasing, compared with earlier decades when Internet-illiterate adults often had little idea what their tech-savvy offspring were doing online. Finally, even given the risks, teens derive many benefits and gratifications from Internet use.

Gender differences, as well as some similarities, are apparent in social media site preferences and amount of use. The sites most popular with teenagers and young adults of both genders (as of 2014) are Facebook and Twitter, which constitute social network sites according to the three criteria articulated by [boyd and Ellison \(2007\)](#): they have user profiles, allow for 'friending' (or 'following' on Twitter), and contain social networks that can be navigated to encounter friends of friends. A Pew study conducted in the United States found that 80% of online teens use social network sites, Facebook being the most popular, with 93% of those teens reporting its use ([Lenhart et al., 2011](#)). Teens have been leaving Facebook recently, however, and migrating to newer social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp, which they consider 'cooler' and where they are less likely to encounter their parents ([Kiss, 2013](#)). Girls on average spend more time on social network sites and use them more actively than boys do ([Brenner, 2012](#); [Rideout et al., 2010](#)). More girls than boys use Facebook and Twitter; female users, including teens, also predominate on the online pinboard Pinterest. Conversely, more males use music-sharing sites such as last.fm, as well as Reddit, a social news Web site known for its sometimes misogynistic content ([HuffPost Women, 2012](#); [Williams, 2012](#)). The gender breakdown for Instagram and Snapchat users, the majority of whom are teens, was roughly equal as of October 2013 ([Duggan, 2013](#)).

Gender differences are also present in the ways teens use the Internet and social media, although usage patterns have shifted over time. In 1999, teenage boys in the United Kingdom reported using computers more often than girls and feeling more comfortable doing so ([Livingstone and Bovill, 1999](#)). By 2004, however, both genders were embracing the Internet as a means of communicating with their friends: [Gross \(2004\)](#) found that the most common activity among American middle and high school students was chatting via instant messaging. In 2007, teenage girls in the United States were more active bloggers than boys – perhaps the first time that females were more active participants than males in a public mode of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Boys, meanwhile, were more likely to upload online videos and use video-sharing applications ([Lenhart et al., 2007](#)). In recent years, boys still spend more time using computers, especially playing video games and visiting video Web sites such as YouTube ([Rideout et al., 2010](#)). However, girls create and share more video ([Lenhart, 2012](#)) and also are more likely to video chat, in keeping with their more active texting and mobile communication behaviors ([Lenhart et al., 2010](#)). Regardless of gender, most teens in the United States today spend part of their leisure time online visiting social media sites ([Rideout et al., 2010](#)).

The main reason young adults in the United States give for visiting social network sites is to connect and communicate with others and to satisfy their curiosity about their online friends and acquaintances ([Urista et al., 2009](#)). Adolescent girls generally use them to communicate with peers and to reinforce preexisting relationships, while boys more often use the platforms to meet new people and make new friends. Boys are also more likely to identify with groups on social network sites that differ from their offline peer circles ([Barker, 2009](#); [Lenhart and Madden, 2007a](#)).

A consequence of gender differences in social media use is that girls and boys frequent somewhat different sites and engage in different, albeit overlapping, activities on the sites they visit. However, most social media contexts involve a mix of both genders. This has implications for how teens self-present.

Social Media Profiles

Profile Content

Self-presentation online takes place primarily through social media profiles. Many social media sites allow users to create a profile and visually display connections to their social network ([boyd and Ellison, 2007](#)). In addition, many sites allow users to upload and share personal information, pictures, links, music, and other multimedia with their friends' or followers' networks. Profiles first attracted widespread attention on social network sites such as Friendster and MySpace in the middle of the last decade, and they have since been incorporated into many other social media platforms, including chat sites ([Kapidzic and Herring, 2011](#)), Wikipedia ([Lam et al., 2011](#)), and the mobile photo-sharing application Instagram ([Ngak, 2012](#)).

Profiles represent a change in the way Internet users self-present. In earlier textual interactive environments such as chat rooms and MOOs (Multiuser Dimensions, Object Oriented), it was not uncommon for users to invent nicknames and imagined personae ([Bechar-Israeli, 1995](#); [Nakamura, 1995](#)). Now, popular platforms such as Facebook explicitly encourage users to provide truthful personal information. Thus teens tend to present their 'real identity' on these sites through their usernames, photographs, and other information that they provide about themselves ([Zhao et al., 2008](#)). Although this limits users' ability to experiment with their identity online – for example, it is more difficult to pretend to be a different gender, as was possible in text-based anonymous spaces ([Danet, 1998](#)) – young adults can still manipulate their profiles to create impressions that they consider favorable through various means, including number of friends ([Ellison et al., 2007](#)), lists of interests ([Liu, 2007](#)), and pictures that display particular tastes and preferences ([Salimkhan et al., 2010](#)).

Teenage girls and boys differ to some extent in the types of content they post to their profiles. In a study of profiles on several social networking sites, including Facebook, female participants from the United States reported that they post 'cute' pictures, while male participants were more likely to share pictures and comments that they described as self-promoting and that contained sexual content or references to alcohol ([Peluchette and Karl, 2008](#)). On a teenage dating site, however, teen girls' self-descriptions contained significantly more references to sex than boys' did ([Pujazon-Zazik et al., 2012](#)). Girls in both the United States and Sweden are more likely to display friendship ties on social media, for example, by posting photographs of themselves with their friends ([Lenhart and Madden, 2007b](#); [Sveningsson Elm, 2007](#)). Boys, meanwhile, are more likely to orient toward technology, sports, and humor in the information they post to their profile ([Sveningsson Elm, 2007](#)) and to share their location and/or phone number ([Lenhart and Madden, 2007b](#); [Pujazon-Zazik](#)