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The visual digital self: A discourse theoretical analysis of young people's negotiations on gender, reputation and sexual morality online

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Abstract
Young people's self-presentations on Instagram often display considerate discourses on gender, reputation and (sexual) morality. Previous studies have explored how these discourses are embedded in cultural narratives, while overseeing the significance of visibility and visual storytelling cultures online. Using a Foucauldian feminist approach, we explore how young people's discourses reflect the visual performance of aesthetic and neoliberal subjectivities online. Through six groups of young people between thirteen and twenty years old, we investigate how the visibility afforded by Instagram affects the negotiations of young people on gender, reputation and sexual morality. We gave them the agency to create, narrate and reflect upon fictious social media profiles with 'good', 'bad' or 'ideal' self-presentations, using a discourse theoretical analysis to examine the visual artefacts, individual stories and group conversations. Our analysis shows that youth's discourses on self-presentation are based on a dynamic relation between self-determination and self-monitoring. Ideal self-presentations are understood as self-determining performances of visual, aesthetic and neoliberal subjectivities, whereas bad self-presentations are often negotiated as self-monitoring performances regarding sexual morality.

Keywords
Gender, Reputation, Sexuality, Morality, Youth, Social Media

Introduction

In contemporary digital youth cultures, visual social media such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok are increasing in popularity and have become a significant part of visual culture (Duggan et al., 2015; Vanhaelewyn et al., 2020). These discursive spaces provide young people with symbolic resources and various self-presentation and reputation management strategies based on a conscious and goal-driven engagement. This allows them to construct and present the best possible version of themselves (Livingstone, 2002; Lemish, 2010; Stanculescu, 2011). The resulting self-presentations are often edited, remixed and framed to adhere to the dominant norms and moral understandings of youth in particular, as normative identities are more visible and easily accepted by their peers (Naezer, 2018; Yang et al., 2017). Previous research has shown that the visual representation of normative identities often contains and reproduces dominant cultural discourses on gender and heteronormativity (De Ridder, 2014). Western cultures, in particular, provide cultural discourses based on neoliberal subject positions and narratives where the self needs to be individualistic, expressive and authentic (Laermans, 2020). The social media logic of Instagram is very much in line with this neoliberal narrative, as young users are encouraged to perform a visual self whose success is defined by its perceived authenticity, creativity and expressive aestheticism. Images are not only used to present and narrate the visual self, but also to embody the aesthetic ethos of social media. Instagram, being an important part of the everyday online presence of today's youth, provides visual narratives on how self-presentations need to be created and which stories need to be produced in order to take part in the sociability offered by the platform (Thumim, 2012). Young people interact and negotiate with these narratives, social structures and imaginaries in order to mediate and perform their own belonging within a dominant culture of visual storytelling (Caldeira et al., 2020). This discursive performance of the self enables the affective (re)presentation of one's subjectivity (Papacharissi, 2015). In particular as discourses exercise power and carry knowledge on morality, designing and regulating the conditions for the constructions of subjects (Foucault, 1981)

Since the visual storytelling culture of Instagram emphasizes certain cultural and aesthetic discourses, it is important to understand how young people make sense of this discursive knowledge on the visual self. The aim of this study is therefore to gain insight in the negotiation and sense-making processes of young people regarding gender, reputation and sexual morality online by examining how young people make sense of self-presentations that are considered to be 'good', 'bad' or 'ideal' on Instagram. In order to capture both the creative and discursive negotiation processes, we organized a visual creativity methodology with six groups of young people between the ages of thirteen and twenty. To minimize peer pressure within these groups, we asked them to create fictious social media profiles to discuss instead of explaining the construction of their own personal profiles on Instagram. Building on a discourse theoretical analysis of the created visual artefacts, individual narratives and group conversations, we explore how their negotiations of self-presentation are affected by dominant discourses on gender, reputation and sexual morality and how they are mediated by the visual and aesthetic storytelling culture of Instagram.

Performing aesthetic and neoliberal subjectivities

Instagram encourages young people to create and curate the self by making photo-editing tools widely accessible (Manovich, 2017), allowing users to ensure that their visual self fits the desired aesthetic (Duffy & Hund, 2015). According to Caldeira (2020), the dominant Instagrammable aesthetic involves the conscious privileging of certain lifestyles, objects and experiences in order to attract attention on Instagram, as the accumulation of likes and followers is increasingly valorized in terms of quantified popularity on the platform (Van Dijck & Poel, 2013). By emphasizing certain photographic conventions, aesthetic values and cultural tastes, Instagram's social media logic is shaping the limits of what is considered photographable, and what can and should be made visible to others. As a result, young people choose to emphasize certain aspects of their personalities, achievements and cultural capital

(Caldeira et al., 2020). In this sense, presenting the self is a performative act which involves 'practices that rely on modalities of relation to itself through which the individual constitutes itself and recognizes itself as a subject' (Foucault, 1984, p.12). While creating an edited self, the subject chooses between different, sometimes even contradictory subject positions, that are embedded in cultural discourses (McNay, 2013). According to Foucault (1975), this subjectivity refers to both self-determination and subordination. The subject chooses autonomously, but the choice is often made within dominant cultural discourses. These discourses are 'assumptions, values and worldview as they are embodied in communal practice' (Dunlap, 1997, p. 48) that people adopt to talk about the self (McLaren, 2009).

Cultural discourses in Western societies often emphasize the concept of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 1979), which means that subjects are expected to create and express a version of themselves that is marketable and creative while emphasizing the importance of emotionality and authentic experiences (Laermans, 2020). When presented online, neoliberal subjects also need to take visibility into account, as exposure is an important means and outcome of visual social media (Woodward, 2015). Since the poststructuralist notion of the self-reflective subject is quite dominant within Western cultures (McNay, 2013), neoliberal subjectivity still implies a negotiation process in which subjects need to rationally choose between the available cultural and moral codes. Even though it might seem like free choice, there is an individual responsibility for the own actions, and every action demands careful reputation management (Laermans, 2020). For young people, knowledge of their peers' reputations has the potential to shape their lives by providing predictions of what might happen if they make discursive or behavioral errors. Thus, reputations make it possible for social media users to evaluate, channel and shape the self in ways that mirror the discourses and behaviors of peers whose opinions they value the most (Fine, 2008). This 'politics of status' (Silverstone, 1994) requires a complicated decision-making process about what visual information should be shared or not be shared with others (Hand, 2012). As Habermas' (1990) notion of communicative action also states, we need to understand the self and the actions of the self as always being mediated through interaction with others. The ability to look and see ourselves as others see us is essential for our identity formation (Lyon, 2006), and is being translated into a discourse on Instagram in which 'being perceived' means 'being visible'. Therefore, the creation of the self is inseparably linked to processes of social interaction.

In the context of Instagram, this neoliberal subjectivity includes a performative act of reputation management in which subjects have to create visual selves that are adjusted to the dominant cultural discourses within their own peer groups. Goffman (1959, p. 15) defined a performance as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.' Indeed, a performance involves the practice of doing, but also displays that specific act of doing (Schechner, 2002). The self is performative as it is constructed by visible and repetitive performative practices regarding social roles associated with gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class (Butler, 1990). These performances often reflect dominant discourses on appropriate social and behavioral norms and expectations, but they might also lead to new interpretations as more audiences engage with them (Papacharissi, 2015). As Giddens' (1991) theory of the self as a self-reflexive project indicates, individuals are increasingly self-aware and self-reflective in their efforts to combine their several performances into an intelligible narrative of the self while negotiating cultural discourses within social structures and imaginaries (Papacharissi, 2015). This negotiation process, in which the limits of subjectivity are explored, mainly indicates an aesthetic exploration (McNay, 2013). Instagram in particular emphasizes the idea of an aesthetic existence as the platform challenges young people to engage in self-presentation and impression management strategies to create the self as 'a work of art' (Foucault, 1984; McNay, 2013). Every post on Instagram involves a reflexive decision about aesthetics, contributing to a visual culture in which self-presentations are mediated and negotiated through online images (Ibrahim, 2015; Laestadius, 2017). The notion of aesthetic

expressivism, in which the expression of the self 'makes something manifest while at the same time realizing it, completing it' (Taylor, 1989, p. 377), is still very present in the contemporary logic of Instagram. Expressing and performing the aesthetic self by means of visual elements and through a visual storytelling culture adds to the rhetorical creation of an intimate narrative of the self (Langellier & Peterson, 2006).

Instagram's visual storytelling culture

Although storytelling is an ancient human practice used to make sense of the world, digital media have affected the ways in which people tell stories (Lambert, 2013). Couldry (2008, p. 374) defines digital storytelling as 'the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially public form using digital media resources.' It needs to be understood as mediation, which is 'a dialectic process of circulation, production and interpretation of media content that effects and is effected by social and cultural institutions' (Canella, 2017, p.25). Since the outputs of digital storytelling practices are often circulating between several sites, audiences and institutions, they create common forms of discourse (Canella, 2017; De Fina, 2016). However, digital technologies are affecting the way these discourses are produced and received in significant ways (De Fina, 2016). Visual social media, such as Instagram, provide tools to narrate the self in more visual, ephemeral and editable ways. Self-presentations based on images can include text, emojis, filters, GIFs and video effects. Additionally, metadata such as hashtags or user locations can be added to share an experience, document a feeling or present the self in an aesthetically pleasing manner (Villaespesa & Wowkowych, 2020).

Instagram, as a form of networked publics, is emphasizing four affordances. It affords persistence by allowing and encouraging its users to capture and share everyday life moments through the app; searchability through built-in search functions for users, videos, locations and hashtags; replicability, as it is possible to take screenshots of the shared posts; and visibility, as most content is accessible for others to see (boyd, 2010; Laestadius, 2017). In this manner, Instagram enables a culture of visual storytelling in which we need to understand the dominant narratives as ways of both seeing and understanding our peers (Erstad & Wertsch, 2008). Since these narratives are the outcome of storytelling practices, they dictate the normative understandings that are regulating relationships and expectations among people (De Fina, 2016). Moreover, the most distinctive aspect of storytelling on social media is the manner in which narratives are 'shared, recontextualized, commented upon and subject to continuous reconfigurations and reinterpretations' (De Fina, 2016, p.477). It emphasizes not only the content, but also the production and circulation of certain narratives and discourses. As we live in a media-saturated society in which material and mediated conditions of living are intertwined (Deuze, 2014), storytelling has become an important form of communication (De Fina, 2016). Visual storytelling in particular has evolved into a daily practice within contemporary digital youth cultures. The visibility afforded by social media has become a powerful tool in the representation and construction of one's self. The performance of self-presentation makes it possible to experiment with discursive understandings of language and aesthetics while constructing everyday narratives that support storytelling practices of the self (Hamera, 2006).

Although the number of studies on mediated communicative processes is increasing, research on how they are embedded in cultural discourses is limited. Therefore, we conducted a discourse theoretical analysis to gain insight in the negotiations of youth on gender, reputation and sexual morality in relation to self-presentation online. We started with a description of the visual artefacts, followed by a thorough discussion of our analysis in the conclusion.

Methodology

Our qualitative research design involves a visual creative methodology consisting of six groups of young people (N=57) between thirteen and twenty years old (Gauntlett &

Holzwarth, 2006). We partnered with several schools and youth organizations[1] in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium to carry out our research in naturally occurring peer groups (see table 1). Although our sample has a large age bracket, each of our six groups had participants from existing peer groups of similar ages within the schools and youth organizations, guaranteeing subjects a safe space to discuss their everyday lives online. Guiding our participants through a creative activity where they had to create a fictional account in the form of collages, we asked them to design either a 'good', 'bad' or 'ideal' social media profile. We did not clarify what we meant or expected with 'good', 'bad' or 'ideal' profiles, as we were interested in how they would interpret and negotiate these discursive understandings. Our participants were free to choose which type of social media profile on which visual social media they were going to portray or what their subject would be, using several magazines to source images and inspiration. Interestingly, the majority of our participants almost automatically chose to create a social media profile based on the structure of Instagram, a preference we discuss in our findings.

We used a great number of popular (national and international) magazines covering fashion, lifestyle, news and actuality as well as magazines specifically designed for women, men and youth. Although we tried to provide a wide and diverse range of magazines, most of them were written and created from a Western cultural perspective. The dominant Western rhetoric in the magazines might have affected and perhaps limited the available discourses and portrayals from which the participants could choose from. However, as our research takes interest in the social media negotiations of young people growing up within Western (digital) cultures, we are convinced of the relevance of these magazines and the visuals used in our method. We asked our participants to individually create a social media profile, yet in our focus groups with the schools we paired them in groups of two or three due to the larger number of participants. Our aim in this activity was to motivate the participants to design their own media texts, challenging them to create, negotiate and discuss specific interpretations of gender, reputation and sexual morality in relation to self-presentation online. We were able to explore their specific understandings of visual social media and their broader relationships with online platforms (Buckingham, 2009), but also to observe the denotative and connotative logic of their narrative construction (Freda et al., 2019). To respect the privacy of our participants, we use pseudonyms to refer to them in our findings section. With respect to the ethical considerations[2], we used a triple consent method. The schools and youth organizations, the participants, and their parents received consent documents with information about the research.

[1] These schools and youth organizations are known for working with young people from diverse social groups in terms of gender, social class, ethnicity and age.

[2] This research project is approved by the Ethical Committee of Ghent University.

Table 1: Overview of the participants

School/Youth Organization	Participants (N = 57)	Gender	Ethnic–Cultural Diversity	Age
Secondary School	16	Female: 13 Male: 3	Low	16–18
Secondary School	13	Female: 10 Male: 3	High	14–16
Secondary School	10	Female: 9 Male: 1	High	16–20
Youth Organization	9	Female: 0 Male: 9	High	15–16
Youth Organization	6	Female: 4 Male: 2	High	15–18
Youth Organization	3	Female: 1 Male: 2	Low	15–17

We conducted a discourse theoretical analysis of the creative discussion groups consisting of interviews, the created visual artefacts and the attached individual narrations. The narrative character of our visual data serves as a site of ideological negotiation, allowing us to explore patterns in the discursive-ideological statements accepted as common sense (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Van Dijk, 2011). As discourse structures the way we perceive reality (Foucault, 1981), the discursive structures circulating on social media can affect our understanding of self-presentation in terms of appropriateness (morality), desirability (aesthetic) and visibility (reputation). Even though visual social media offer extreme access to the everyday lives of young people, practices such as self-reflection and confession often remain ambiguous when the focus is only on images (Hand, 2017). Therefore, we asked our participants to narrate the story attached to these creative works and discuss their visual choices and discursive understandings with their peers during the group conversations. We examined both our visual and textual data as discursive artefacts reflecting identity expression, sociocultural context and power hierarchies (Fairclough, 1995). Our discourse theoretical analysis focused on the visual rhetoric of the images that were recurring in the majority of the collages. We found that visual, aesthetic and neoliberal subjectivities which value independence and self-determination also require continuous self-monitoring.

We started with a semiotic analysis of the visual artefacts created by our participants by inductively and thematically coding the visual data in detail (Julien, 2008). These codes were identified through re-reading the data and representing categories that exist both at the surface (what is physically present in a picture) and at a deeper level of meaning-making (the connotative meanings). We began our analysis by coding the visual and textual elements present in the collages. First, we looked at the general descriptive elements, such as (1) which social media platform is presented, (2) the gender/sex of the subject, (3) the number of followers and people followed, and (4) the total number of pictures. Second, we analyzed the

denotative meanings of the visual, textual and compositional elements that are represented on the collages: (1) subject(s), (2) background/context, (3) pose and posture, (4) color, (5) object(s), (6) activities, and (7) textual elements. Finally, we studied the connotative meanings of the portrayed visual and textual elements as they provide social clues on both the content and context of the presented images (Lister & Wells, 2001). To enhance our understanding and to situate the analyzed images within the social and cultural contexts of digital youth cultures, we conducted a discourse theoretical analysis on the individual stories and group conversations as well. As Rose (2016, p. 2) notes, it is important to analyze the meaning-making processes that occur when (re)presenting images, as they are 'never transparent windows on the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it.' There are three sites where the meaning of images is made: the site of production (genre conventions), the site of the image itself (composition, meanings and effects) and the site of 'being seen' by audiences (Rose, 2016, p. 19). This last site refers to how images are interpreted and by whom; the ways it is portrayed, shared and viewed. As the meaning of images is socially created, we asked our participants to tell the story of their fictional characters and explain their choices of text and visuals. We were able to trace discursive patterns in relation to 'good', 'bad' and 'ideal' reputations online across the individual stories and the analysis of the collages as they reflected specific narratives on the visual, aesthetic and neoliberal subjectivities created by participants (Riessman, 1993; Halkier, 2010). To ensure validity, we conducted several member checks during the individual and group narratives by summarizing their discourses and asking the participants to verify our understandings (Bygstad & Munkvold, 2007). All group discussions were audiotaped, transcribed and coded using NVivo 12.

Findings

Young people interpret certain aspects of their visual selves as (un)desirable and (in)appropriate to be seen by other peers, especially on Instagram, where the visual self becomes a 'visible' self. Although many of the youngsters in our groups believe the platform is 'often used to spy on others' (Sarah, 18), the majority of the created profiles were designed as Instagram profiles. Our participants explained that the platform's visual storytelling culture and emphasis on aesthetic and structure makes it convenient to 'create a portfolio of your nicest pictures' (David, 17) and asks young people to evaluate their photographs and 'think whether it is a good picture or not' (Charlotte, 17). Remarkably, the collages representing 'good' and 'ideal' self-presentations were often very similar. The visual and textual choices the participants made during the creative process, displayed aestheticized neoliberal subjects that were both appropriate and desirable to make visible online.

Neoliberal aesthetics

The social media profiles of Poyraz Aktas (Figure 1) and Elijo (Figure 2) embody this idealized form of self-presentation by visually emphasizing the neoliberal values of success, wealth and physical attractiveness. For example, Poyraz' profile illustrates his understanding of success by mentioning in his biography that he is a professional model and listing the contact information of his management. More importantly, he has a verification badge (V) besides his name. As an account 'must represent a well-known, highly searched for person' (Instagram, 2020) to become verified, this badge indicates the importance of the visible recognition of success and status. This can also be seen in the gap between the number of followers and the number of people followed by the profiles of both Poyraz and Elijo. A large number of followers represents high social status and is generally considered valuable as it broadens the scope of being seen. Other recurring neoliberal values frequently portrayed were wealth and physical attractiveness. Wealth was generally depicted in neoliberal and cosmopolitan terms through association with a luxurious lifestyle including expensive cars, designer clothing and tropical holidays. Attractiveness was interpreted in a Western aesthetic, in which the subjects were often white, skinny, able-bodied and heterosexual. This

beauty standard was illustrated through pictures of good-looking models with fashionable clothes, fit bodies with sixpacks and sensual poses.

Besides the neoliberal aesthetic of materiality, there was also the portrayal of an aesthetic morality. Moral practices such as charity or volunteer work were visualized as essential parts of the narrative of the self. Most of the profiles included photographs (Figure 1, pic. 4) or drawings of children in poverty (Figure 2, pic. 8). When asked how these images fit within ideal self-presentations, it became clear that engaging in charity work is seen as a valuable trait, both from an intrinsically altruistic belief that 'it is good to volunteer' (Jane, 17) and from the more functionalistic view that 'it makes it easier to find a job later'(Emma, 17). According to Celine (16), who created the account of Poyraz, charity work is an important part of his narrative: 'He knows what it feels like to live in poverty, so he takes photographs of those sceneries to show them to the world. He also donates money to a lot [of organizations].' Similarly, sociability through being likeable and friendly was also portrayed as a crucial part of this narrative. For example, in Elijo's profile, we can see pictures of friends with captions indicating fun and loyalty, such as 'I love being with my friends! #friendsthatworkouttogetherstaytogether.' By doing so, she presents herself as a social person, reaffirming her social status among peers. Although this neoliberal, expensive and 'Insta-aesthetic' lifestyle is rarely achievable for most young people, it guides their discursive understanding of how ideal, or even good, self-presentations should be portrayed online.

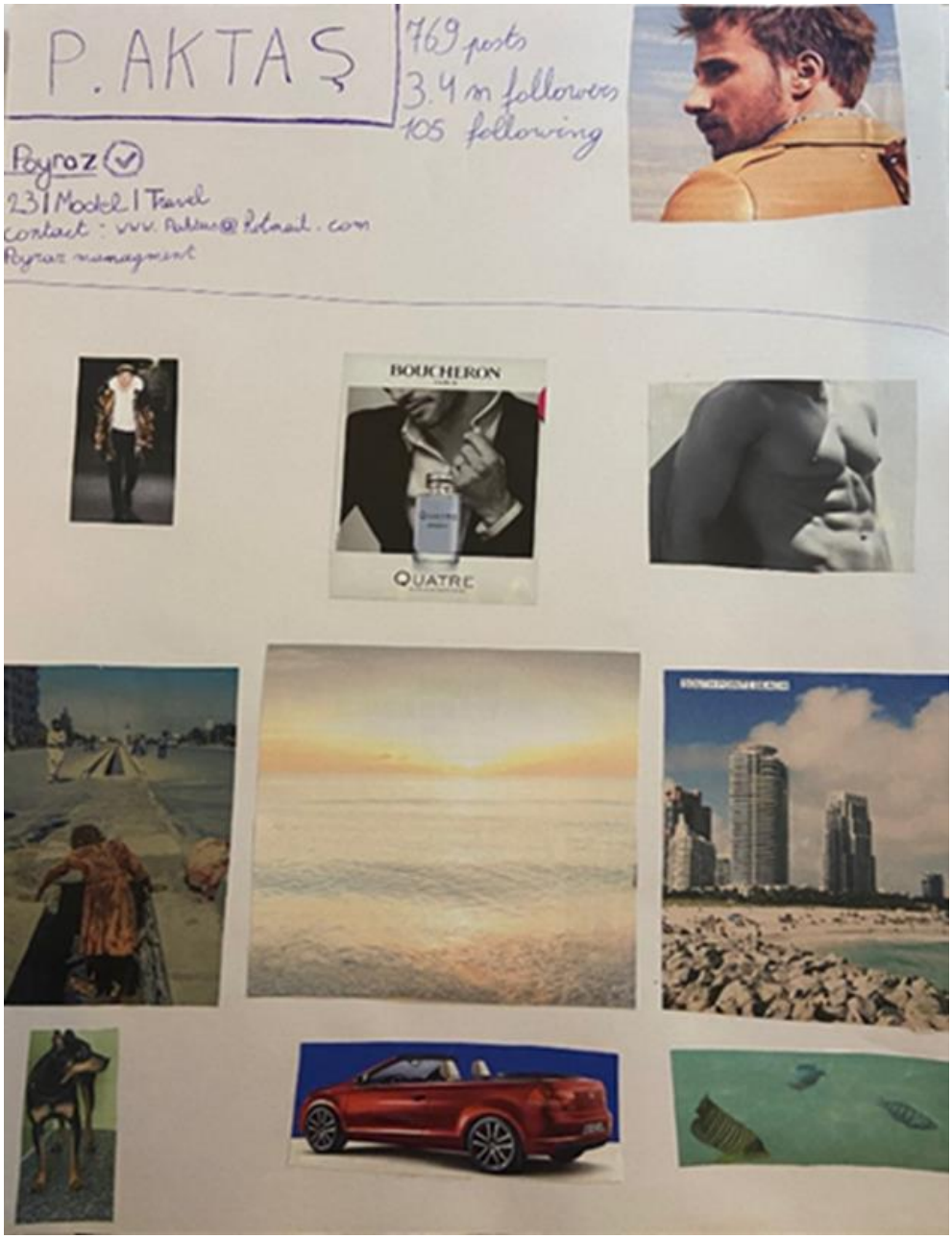

Figure 1. Poyraz Aktas - 'Ideal' Instagram

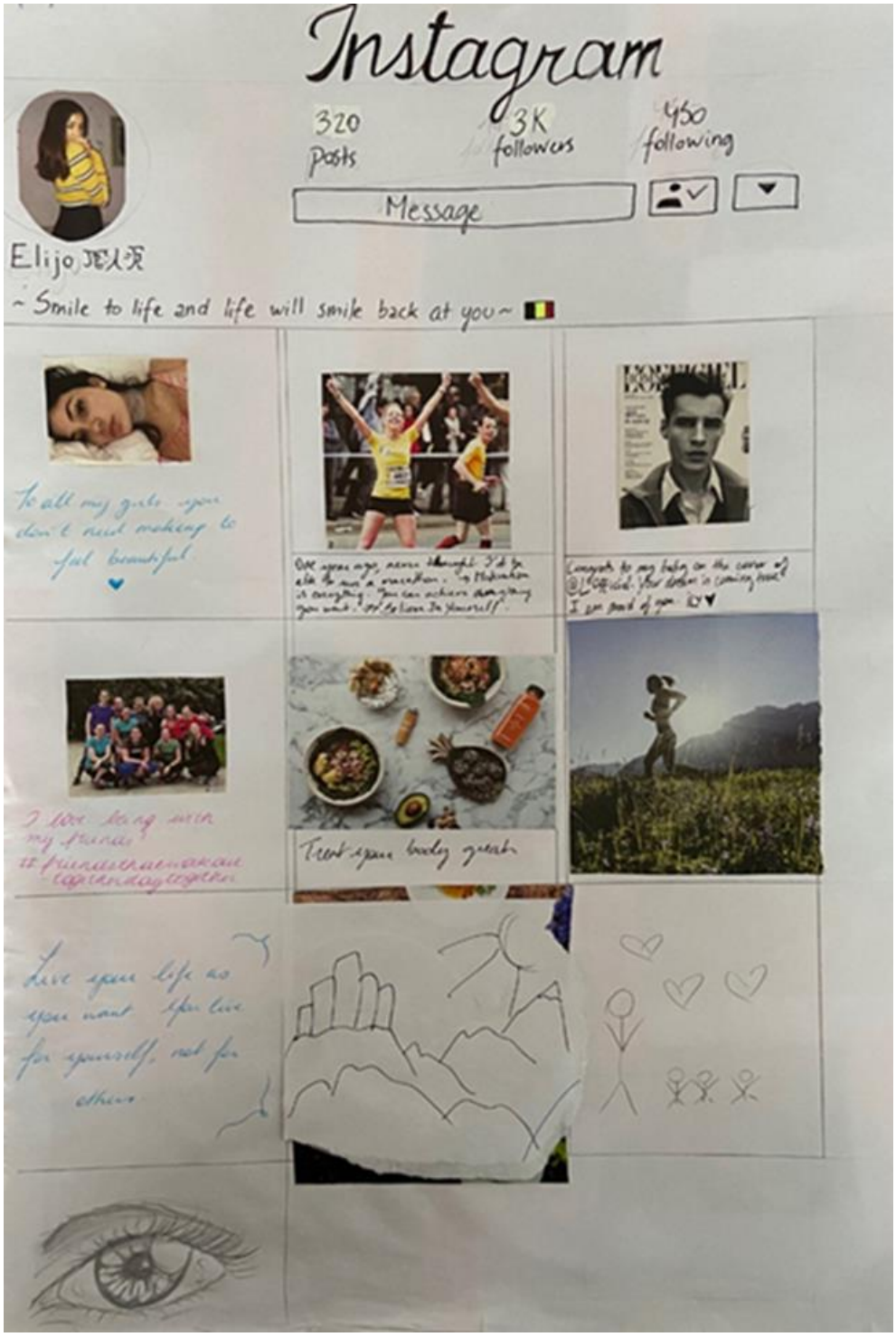

Figure 2. Elijo - 'Ideal' Instagram

Gendered aesthetics

Young participants also had the option of creating 'bad' self-presentations. Interestingly, the majority of bad visual artefacts depicted sexual and immoral behavior. We could trace

recurring patterns of overt performances of sexuality, such as nudity and borderline-pornographic sexual acts. Although these self-presentations included images of both young men and women, the subjects to whom the profiles belonged were mainly female. The majority of the photographs showed young women partying, consuming alcohol and having sex, accompanied by hashtags like '#yolo' and captions stating 'sex, love, fun'. Although these were not interpreted as intrinsically bad things to do, the explicit portrayal of these acts was interpreted as 'inappropriate' (Jane, 17), 'stupid' (Oscar, 15) and 'nasty' (Debby, 17). The profile of Chanel (Figure 3.) is a telling example of how our participants think a bad profile looks like. Her biography mentions that she is twenty-one years old and has three children. The maternal part of her identity is shown through multiple images of nude pregnant bellies. This led to interesting discussions on whether revealing pictures of pregnant women were appropriate or not. The general understanding was that they were 'beautiful and pure' (Emma, 17) and certainly not 'bad' (Sarah, 17). Yet, Emily (17), who created this profile, clarified that the combination of being 'just' twenty-one and 'already' having three children is what makes it 'bad' in her understanding, especially as her pictures often had immoral captions like 'Third boyfriend of the month' or 'New Sugardaddy'.

A similar profile is that of Linda (Figure 4.), a young woman who explicitly claims her sexuality by naming herself 'Sexy Linda' and mentioning in her biography that she is into both 'Boys & Girls'. This is accompanied by the 18+, which' indicates that she posts sexually explicit content that is not suited for minors. Rosa (15), the creator of this profile, explained that Linda has a 'bad reputation because she posts a lot of nude pictures. That is why she has a lot of followers. It's because they are all old men.' Although her reasoning was questioned by Lucas (15), who found it illogical because in his interpretation 'you have less followers if you have a bad reputation,' Rosa justified her choice by adding that 'people are always searching for extremes.' Because Linda's sexual visibility is mainly attracting older men, she positions Linda as an extreme, vulnerable and sexualized young girl. By doing so, she unconsciously internalizes and contributes to the dominant intimacy panics (Naezer, 2018).

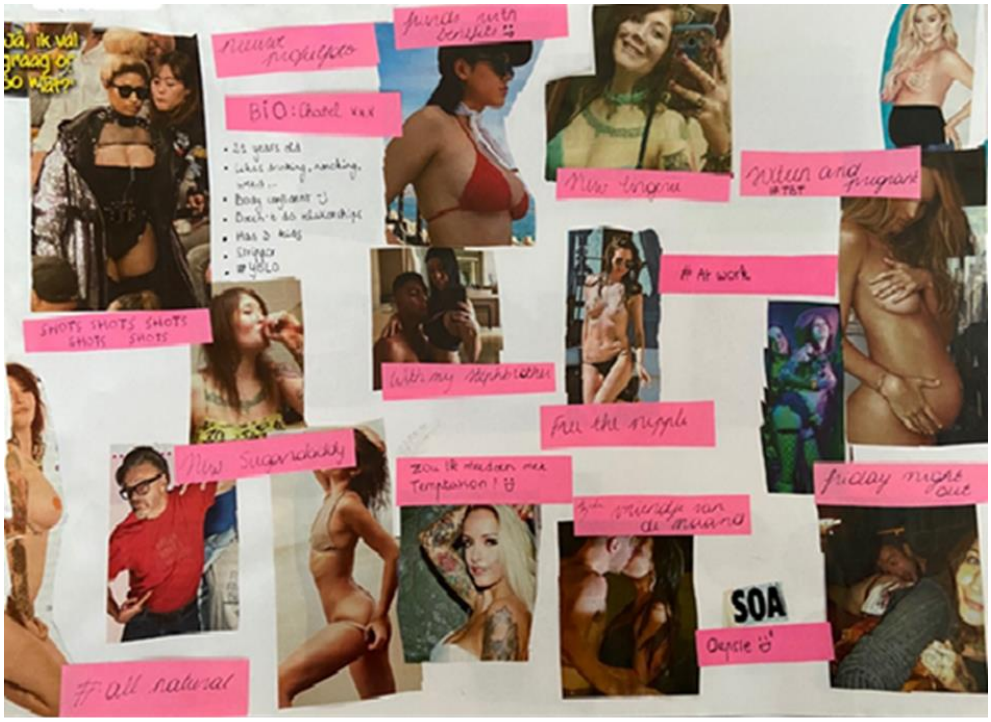

Figure 3. Chanel - 'Bad' Instagram

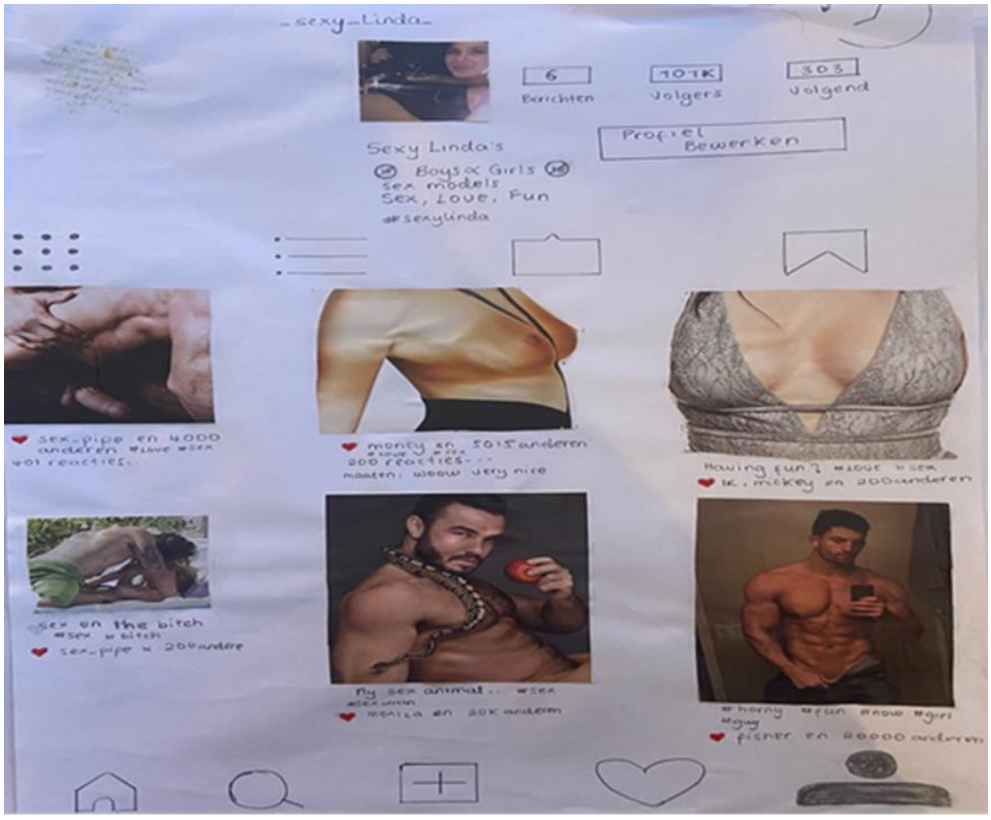

Figure 4: Linda - 'Bad' Instagram

Discussion

Our analysis shows how cultural discourses affect youth's negotiations of gender, reputation and morality online, especially on Instagram, where visual storytelling culture accentuates neoliberal ideals as aesthetic, likeable and shareable content. Although the possibility of autonomously creating personal narratives was mostly interpreted as an empowering affordance by our participants, the available narratives were centered around normative neoliberal discourses such as success, wealth, physical attractiveness and popularity/sociability. These understandings were highly visible in the collages through the use of both visual and textual elements.

Negotiating reputation

Success and wealth were interpreted in terms of reputation and status, made visible not only by specific images as described above, but also by numeric elements. The number of followers had to be high, preferably higher than the number of people the subject is following back as it is equated with a higher social status. Both Poyraz and Elijo's profiles have a high number of followers, yet Elijo's claim of status is more realistic, with 3000 followers. Her biography contains an inspirational quote and the Belgian flag, creating the impression of approachability and likeability, whereas Poyraz constructs a celebrity status with 3.4 million followers. He is likeable, yet his success is more outspoken. This difference implies a hegemonic masculinity within digital youth cultures (Messerschmidt, 2018) as boys are believed to be more attentive of obtaining a high social status and making that status visible to others. Girls reflect less ambitious but more compassionate values such as softness and inspiration, commonly interpreted as 'feminine' traits. However, regardless of gender, success was often defined in terms of financial success, with an emphasis on being able to afford and achieve a lifestyle compatible with celebrity status. This contributes to young people's understanding of a young and financially successful person being more valid among peers. Although success is an individual merit, the neoliberal subject is still expected to 'give something back' to the community. Wealth has to be shared with others for moral reasons. But making this moral understanding explicitly visible adds to the impression of the neoliberal self as an achievable and humane success story. The narrative of Poyraz, indicating that he once was poor and now is rich enough to donate money, exemplifies how a successful, moral and achievable persona needs to be created to obtain recognition among peers. This politics of status is making young people search for more authentic, visible and non-disputable ways to reassure their good reputation. They have to be as self-aware about their status as possible. Any discursive and behavioral errors can result in judgement and exclusion from peer groups. Thus, by presenting a 'public, well-known and highly searched for' visual self, they subordinate to dominant discursive structures and expectations, making them less a target of judgement, gossip and exclusion.

Negotiating gender

Gender and sexuality are highly visible aspects of the self, carefully portrayed when presenting the visual self. Although distinct gender differences were visible in the collages, there was no negotiation of beauty standards. The creative works representing both females and males were adapted to Instagram's aesthetic structure, highlighting the importance of being visually appealing, regardless of gender. The youngsters in our groups felt empowered using Instagram to individually design their visual selves; however, this empowerment can feel liberating and oppressive at the same time as they still have to conform to normative understandings of beauty to be seen and accepted by their peers. Rather than physical attractiveness, it was discursive understandings on sociability and reputation that were clearly gendered. The collages representing girls often included pictures of friends, proving their amicability, whereas boys can portray young, popular and successful masculinity without feeling the need to prove their likeability. Even when presenting a similar neoliberal subjectivity, girls still felt the need to include pictures and captions confirming that they have

fun with friends and family and are therefore social and likeable. Despite the fact that girls' lives have become visibly de-traditionalized in the past years (McRobbie, 2000), portraying a 'feminine' self on social media is still negotiated within traditional and sexist expectations. This was apparent in our groups: girls navigated their self-presentations by including images of successful young women while making sure they were still perceived as likeable, highlighting 'feminine' traits like kindness, softness and caring. Moreover, girls were expected to adjust to the norm of being sexually modest (Attwood, 2007; Lasén, 2015). Despite the emphasis on the physical attractiveness of their bodies, girls' sexuality was rarely embodied or visible on the collages representing ideal or good subjectivities. As girls are regularly avoiding circumstances enabling the sexualization of their visual selves, it can be difficult to engage, develop and portray sexual agency online. Although these self-presentations occur in a postfeminist context where the ideal of sexual freedom for girls is more common (McRobbie, 2009), this ideal coexists with more conservative understandings that hold girls responsible for maintaining a sexual reputation that is innocent, modest and careful (Ringrose, 2011; Naezer & Ringrose, 2018).

Negotiating sexual morality

Earlier studies (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; García-Gómez, 2017) examined self-presentations as gendered constructs negotiated within heteronormative frames of sexual agency. This negotiation of sexual norms is generally applicable to everyone, yet in our groups it became clear that girls are criticized more for self-presentations of sexual agency and pleasure. It is telling how the 'bad' self-presentations were almost unconsciously linked to young women's expressions of sexual pleasure. These sexual female self-presentations were judged and ridiculed, portrayed as 'cartoonish', 'immature' and 'trashy' people. As Rosa's (15) explanation for the high number of followers on Linda's account also shows, women actively claiming their sexuality are also interpreted as women without agency who are victimized and sexualized by others. The ideal of female innocence (Ringrose & Renold, 2012) is still dominant in Western societies and seems to shape young people's understandings of sexual morality online. Despite social media's ability to create empowering spaces, normative discourses on how to be visible are affecting girls in contradictory ways. In order to gain recognition among peers, they have to present a neoliberal visual self where they embody youthfulness, success and independence. Although this is in line with the postfeminist context in which digital youth cultures nowadays operate (Dobson, 2015; Pruchniewska, 2018), sexual agency and pleasure for women is not considered to be a part of it. It seems that for women willing to perform a sexual subjectivity online, the available subject positions are very limited. Dominant cultural discourses make it difficult to determine and create the self as a sexual subject without being interpreted as bad, dirty and immoral. Despite the increasing emphasis on the attractiveness and aesthetic of bodies, sexual pleasure still seems to be the main aspect of the visual self that needs to be monitored constantly, particularly because it can be understood as a behavioral error, damaging the subject's reputation. Still, we need to question how the reputation of young girls is being almost exclusively negotiated in terms of sexual morality, even in a highly aestheticized and sexualized visual culture.

Conclusion

Our aim was to understand the negotiation and sense-making processes of young people on gender, reputation and sexual morality online. We explored how self-presentations mediated by Instagram's visual storytelling culture contribute to the neoliberal narrative of the self. Self-presentations are increasingly being performed as success stories online, as Instagram is visually promoting neoliberal aesthetics in which subjects are defined by connection, self-creation and creativity. However, these self-creations are embedded in cultural discourses providing limited, gendered and normative subject positions to choose from, despite recurring themes of empowerment and activism on Instagram. Using a methodology that

includes a diverse sample of youth in terms of gender, ethnicity, age and educational level, our analysis shows that the dominant discourses within digital youth cultures are interpreted similarly by diverse youth, indicating the power of normative understandings on gender, reputation and morality online. We believe that our qualitative and creative approach empowered our young participants to discuss sensitive topics openly and safely. Yet, these were organized in peer group settings in which normative and socially desirable discourses were most likely apparent. Therefore, it would be interesting for future research to adapt similar qualitative, creative and visual approaches during in-depth interviews with young people to minimize peer pressure and to design safe spaces in which they can voice their understandings and perceptions of gender, sexuality and morality online.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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