Representations of Gender on Social Media among Brazilian Young People

Between Reinforcing and Challenging the Stereotypes

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In this article we explore young Brazilians' reinforcement of gender-stereotypical and gender non-conforming expressions on social media, to see how Brazilian teenagers reproduce or contest the hyper-sexualized, heteronormative discourses around femininity and masculinity. Three models inspired the theoretical frameworks, namely the Butlerian discoursive subjectivity and performativity, Karen Barad's model of posthuman materialism and the concept of intra-action of non-human agents, and Sonia Livingstone's concept of social media literacy. The sample consists of 12 focus groups (60 respondents, 11 to 17 years old) conducted in metropolitan area of São Paulo in September 2016. Overall, our study showed a reinforcement of the heterosexual matrix, with some notable exceptions of contestation from both boys and girls. Our article offers a contribution to the research on young people and social media in South America through taking into account both local contexts and dominant discourses around gender and sexuality.

Literature review

The polarized discourses over the hyper-sexualization of young people and the critique of the 'sexualization thesis' as a part of the moral panic that infringes on young people's rights for sexual expression and agency have been noted by previous research (Bray, 2008; Ringrose, 2011). Moreover, in the "postfeminist moral panic" (Ringrose, 2013), extreme incidences of youth sexual images 'gone wrong' have been dramatized in mass media to the point of conflating sexting with cyberbullying. Media and digital media have also been characterised as spaces with increasing pressures over visual displays as compulsory 'disciplinary technology of sexy' (Gill, 2008) and normalised hyper-sexualized discourses and imagery (Ringrose, 2011) around femininity and masculinity. Part of these regulating technologies, especially those focused on femininity and female bodies,

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the practices of body shaming and slut shaming have been on the rise as "culturally specific formations" (Dobson, 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2012), mediated by mass media and more recently, by social media, with their economy of posting, tagging, sharing and monitoring of content (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013).

Social media as 'networked publics' (boyd, 2008) has been widely embraced by young people for purposes of communication and connection to peers, as well as for continuous negotiation of constructing and presenting images of gendered self as part of teen sexual identities. However, as Livingstone and Mason (2015) note, girls face the challenge of having to express hyper-feminine sexualised roles, stemming from internalising stereotypical, body-objectified self-concepts promoted by media, while keeping the image of "proper" feminine behaviour. Conversely, young boys are pressured into projecting images of emotionless, aggressive, and toxic masculinity (Holloway, 2015) in their expressions on social media. Previous research has focused on social media use for gendered and sexual interactions in adolescents' comments on Facebook (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013) and on their performative sexualized femininity and masculinity across social networking sites (Ringrose & Barajas, 2011; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015b).

The practices of seeking validation on social media are also carefully monitored and judged, with those seen as less "attention seeking" being considered more highly valued conquests (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015a). Also, the relationship status of a girl plays a significant role in what displays are deemed more acceptable, as girls already in a relationship are seen as more "respectable" than single ones (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015a) and thus can get away with sexy self-displays. When it comes to displays of masculinity, these same rules do not apply, reinstating "the sexual double standards around feminine sexual activity and respectability and masculine prowess via the circulation and relative reward and/or judgements of social media images" (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015a, p. 221). On the contrary, boys are rewarded for bodily displays of tough masculinity (Manago, 2013).

In this article, we are interested in how young people aged 11 to 17 present themselves on social media and reinforce or challenge dominant representations and discourses about gender (e.g., the cult of the body in general, and objectification of female bodies in particular). We focus on issues around gendered representations to see how Brazilian teenagers reproduce or contest the hyper-sexualized, heteronormative discourses around femininity and masculinity (e.g., "girls have to be pretty" for the male gaze; "boys have to be strong and powerful" and not pass as weak or gay) and discuss how the dominant cult of the body and objectification discourses are re-produced in young people's discussion about their self-presentation on social media, choice of picture, reflections on audiences and hetero-perceptions (ideas about the other gender).

We draw on three theoretical frameworks in order to discuss young Brazilian's presentation on social media and their performative reinforcement (or contestation) of heterosexualised gender norms, namely the Butlerian discoursive subjectivity and performativity; Karen Barad's model of posthuman materialism and the concept of in-

tra-action of non-human agents; and Sonia Livingstone's concept of social media literacy. From Judith Butler (1993) we retain the idea that gender is not a pre-existing fact, but rather something enacted and expressed through "stylised acts" of the body that are socially and culturally bound. Through the continuous reproduction of these acts, the illusion of a fixed, coherent identity emerges while gender norms are discoursely (re) enforced through concealment and naturalisation. From Karen Barad (2003, 2007) via Ringrose and Rawling's (2015) discussion of anti-bullying policies, we acknowledge the importance of "spacetimematterings" (space, objects, time), such as hair, make-up, sexy poses, "label" clothes, use of Snapchat filters to hide unflattering details (e.g. pimples), as "more-than-human relationalities" (Ringrose & Rawling, 2015) of equal standing alongside discourses, in constructing and curating one's image on social media. Together with the concept of technological affordances (Hutchby, 2001), i.e., the structural features of a medium, the material objects interact with norms of reputation and status in the discursive performance of identities on social media. And finally, from Sonia Livingstone 's work (2014), we acknowledge the process through which social media sites (or social network sites, SNSs) encode social interactions as text, which makes relevant the concept of social media literacy, which includes the "tasks of decoding, evaluating and creating communication in relation to media qua representation (text, image, platform, device, etc.) and qua social interaction (relationships, networks, privacy, anonymity, etc.), since these are integrated in the very nature and use of SNSs" (Livingstone, 2014, p. 285). Livingstone's argument for classifying young people's social media literacy according to their developmental stage (with differences noted between children 9 to 11, 12 to 13 and 14 to 16 years old) was taken into consideration when analysing the self-presentation practices of young Brazilians (although our age grouping was more tight, as informed by recommendations from our pilot study).

Description of project, sampling and methodology

In the context of achieving gender equality as one of the sustainable goals for 2030, understanding how ICTs and social media help reduce (or not) the gender gap for young people is an important undertaking. The qualitative project on ICT and gender for young people (2016) undertaken by the Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br)[1] in São Paolo, Brazil, aims to explore practices of access, uses and activities of young people online, as well as ways of self-expression and presentation on social media, socialisation of privacy in the context of learning about consent and boundaries, and technology-mediated violence (including sexual violence). The project is interested in how dominant social representations and discourses around gender are reproduced or challenged in the uses of ICT and new media among young Brazilians. Following a pilot phase, the fieldwork[2] (conducted in metropolitan area of São Paulo in September 2016) consisted in 12 single-sex focus groups conducted in Portuguese with

young people aged 11-12, 13-14, 15-17, with additional sampling for socio economic level (SEL), the criteria adopted in this case were the Brazilian Classification Criteria[3] that classify households according to consumer goods (avoiding the non-responses related to income).The variables racial-ethnical composition (following the official Brazilian distribution) and type of school (public versus private) were also included in the sample definition. Information about religion was also collected, but not as a sampling variable. Each group had 5 participants (a total of 60 respondents), with an average duration of 120 minutes, and was conducted by a professional moderator (same sex as the group). All the focus groups took place in a one way mirror lab, with all discussions recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis was conducted and relevant quotes were translated by the second and third authors with attention to children's expressions and use of language.

Curating one's profile

The enormous pressures of conforming to beauty standards under the gaze of others on social media was reported by girls in all age groups. Many expressed concern with how they want to present themselves in the pictures they display on social media, some stating that anything less than *tudo perfeito* (everything perfect) is simply unacceptable:

> I am a perfectionist and I want things to be exactly in their place, because they'll make fun of you for anything (girls, 11-12, class AB).

The boys confirm that girls go to extreme lengths to become well-known and receive a lot of recognition:

> They [girls] enjoy making photo collages to get more 'likes' and then she thinks she owns the classroom. There are some girls in the classroom that get a lot of 'likes' on the Internet and they feel powerful (boys, 13-14, class C);
>
> They take 200 photos and post one! (boys, 15-17, class C).

However, although to lesser degree than girls, boys are also self-conscious about their appearance on social media, for example about showing dental braces (boys, 15-17, class AB), being unphotogenic (boys, 15-17, class C) or having dirty hair (boys, 11-12, class C) in pictures.

As Jessica Ringrose remarks in her analyses of data collected with teenagers in UK, girls face the problem of having to make complex choices about how they will construct a sexual digital identity, with contradictory worries about how to be desirable but not 'too' slutty (Ringrose, 2011, p. 106). This double standard of the heterosexual matrix holds true for Brazilian girls too, as here is a thin line between looking sexy and looking slutty. The girls in our research were confronted with this heteronormative requirement in all age groups, although they were reinforcing the slut-shaming discourse in their discussion about the Other girls:

> They take a photo posing in the shape of the letter S, they bend everything (girls, 11-12, class C); There're many girls on Facebook who overexpose themselves. There're girls who use way too short shorts and that, effectively, offer themselves. She can even be ugly, but she has millions of likes, because the boys are interested in this vulgarity; Because when there's free food, it draws a waiting line (girls, 15-17, class C, referring to the construction of "cheap girls").

Here the material elements of "overexposure", and sexually suggestive poses come into play for creating the unacceptable Slut. Therefore, the girls are described as using subterfuges in order to get away with sexy-potentially-slutty pictures, such as pretending to show their beautiful hair, as noticed by some boys in our research:

> He said that there are a lot of girls who post pictures of their hair, they post about their hair, but what they really want is to show their butt (boys, 15-17, class AB). Boys are also aware of the double standard surrounding sexual prowess for boys and girls: Because if somebody takes a picture of me kissing a girl, I am a player, but if it were a girl kissing a boy, everybody would look at her in a strange way[4] (boys, 15-17, class AB).

The social development of younger age groups in our study (11-12, 13-14) present them with the challenges of establishing a valued identity and with forging peer connections, which might explain their excessive preoccupation with obtaining peer validation and confirmation (in the form of "Likes" and followers on social media platform), whereas the older group 15-17 might have already reached a more stable identity and make more confident choices about their interactions and relationships).

The middle group of girls (13-14) is also the one that defies the prescriptions of "normality" and exhibits outwardly norm-breaking behaviour; in the quotes below the material elements of short skirt, short shorts, breasts popping out, provocative posture is completed with the joint, the bottle, red eyes and appearance of inebriation to compose an undesirable character, at the outskirts of the acceptable feminine:

> Some people must show that they are wearing short shorts, a tiny shirt, boobs hanging out, they sit, take a cigarrette, a joint in one hand and a beer in the other. Stop, thats unecessary [...] I have friends that by 7 A.M. are taking photos, have red eyes, a hangover, are high and include the time in the photo, going to school (girls, 13-14, class AB).

Unlike the girls in Ringrose and Renold's research (2012), where girls explicitly embrace norm-challenging behaviours and expressions, here those still belong to the unacceptable Other. Conversely, in the case of boys, the same norms do not apply, as they do not report pressures but actually validation for their rule-breaking behaviour and exposing it on social media:

> Do you know that picture in which you look drunk, but you don't want to delete it because it has more than 1000 likes? (boys, 11-12, class AB).

However, for the oldest group of girls we noticed, in accordance with Sonia Livingstone's remarks, a "growing autonomy from conformist peer norms" (Livingstone 2014, p. 300), which is reflected in their increased reflexivity around gender constructions and stereotypes:

> The time has passed when one could say 'this is for girls and this is for boys'. Especially the need for a woman having to refrain from saying something [...] I think this time has not yet passed, but we are almost there (girls, 15-17, class AB).

Some of them declare their relief to have a break from the tyranny of impossible (and illusory) beauty ideals when the perfectly curated images on Facebook profiles are tarnished with some unflattering photos, such as the ones posted by parents oblivious to the teen social media netiquette or by resurfacing of old pictures by means of Likes and comments:

> These [ugly photos] are the funniest, and a thing we know, as my friends say, is that many people on the Internet look like gods or goddesses and once you see them personally, they are nothing like that. So, it's a good thing to have these tags, because people can see that we aren't just goddesses (girls, 15-17, class AB).

Awareness about multiple audiences

By far the biggest preoccupation for young girls in our study when it comes to their audience was the heterosexual gaze, but reportedly, this works differently for girls and boys. For boys, making visible your relationship status as "taken" will promptly result in a decline of "Likes" and diminishing of status as "desirable" or "attractive". But SNS affordances further complicate matters: the sexist standard of female decency, where being "respectable" means not show too much availability, is discursively reconstructed by girls when they talk about the friends they feel are allowed to be seen next to in pictures:

> I have many male friends, and then I go out with 3 of them and there's only me as a girl then people go around saying 'just broke up with her boyfriend and she's going off with 3.' My boyfriend knows they're just my friends, but sometimes people perceive it through different eyes (girls, 15-17, class AB).

Awareness about audience is brought to attention when young people talk about what are the best hours and days for posting pictures in order to receive the maximum number of "Likes":

> Because if I go with a friend to the party on Friday (and post a picture), I will have less Likes because fewer will see it (boys, 15-17, class AB) (n.a. as compared to Sunday evening when everyone is at home with nothing to do).

However, many described being preoccupied with being under parental scrutiny when it comes to displays adults might find unacceptable (this was solely mentioned in the case of girls). Boys too are preoccupied with them being visible to adults, but solely because of annoying comments from peers: *I already deleted comments because of my family, because there are photos where people comment a lot of stuff* (boys, 13-14, class AB) or because of intrusiveness and lack of privacy (e.g., boys using specific social networks simply because they are not used by their parents – boys, 15-17, class AB). Other times, ideologically incompatible social circles will result in self-censorship on social media: *I have friends who are 'funkeiros' and I have friends from the church. I can't post a photo at the funk party, because my evangelical friends won't like it, and I can't post a photo at the church, because the other friends won't like it* (girls, 11-12, class C).

In these cases of young people agonising over feeling restricted by the gazes of others, the concept of social media literacy and their (lack of) awareness about the option of restricting the content available to different publics is relevant, and here the oldest group displays the necessary skills: [I block my mom and dad] *Because they'll say 'what about those clothes you were wearing out of home yesterday?'* (girls, 15-17, class AB).

Heteroperceptions: "Just like girls care about boobs, boys care about six-pack abs"

In general, girls' impressions about boys is that they care far less about how they come across and are perceived on social media: *Boys post their photos carelessly; They don't care for a background, to have something cuter; The girl is more detail-oriented and the boy just won't mind* (girls, 11-12, class AB), although some notice that boys too take efforts in ensuring they look their best:

> I can't say they don't care because some really don't, but most of them wear a cap, a large t-shirt, Nike or Adidas [shoes], fluorescent braces, "funkeiro pants[5]" (girls, 11-12, class C). It depends, there're some boys nowadays who take more time preparing for the photo than a girl. He must have the right clothes, the right cap, the right sun glasses, the right pose (girls, 13-14, class C).

Here material elements come into play in creating acceptable displays of boys on social media – the right kind of clothes, shoes, glasses and pose.

Nonetheless, the all-encompassing power of stereotypical beauty standards is felt in the words of our respondents, with boys being under the pressure of displaying the sanctioned heteronormative, tough masculinity through human (strong bodies) and non-human inter-acting elements (i.e., practising sports, going to the gym): *almost all of them care about six-pack abs photos, keep posting that they go to the gym, trying to look strong* (girls, 15-17, class C), posing with their mates (girls, 15-17, class C), whereas girls have to adhere to (sometimes impossible) norms of sexiness:

> When you're in high school, at least at my school, if you wanna date a boy you must have something to attract him. At my school, the boys only date the girls with big boobs and a big ass, if you're skinny as I am, they put you away (girls, 15-17, class C).

Boys, however, tend to be judgmental about girls' desire to be famous ("*famosinhas*"), they judge the ones that expose their bodies in order to get Likes, reinforcing the sexism of girls under pressure to be sexy but not too much. Finally, boys report that it is girls mostly who send nasty comments to each other, calling one another "bitch" or "slut" in comments to pictures (boys, 15-17, class AB).

Reinforcing the stereotypes?

The cult of the body and objectification of female bodies in particular were widely present in our respondents' words, with the youngest group in the study already showing preoccupation with conforming to beauty ideals and heteronormative prescriptions of feminine and masculine (e.g., the shunning of "slutty" girls), although these were reinforced throughout all age groups. Achieving the impossible standard of being sexy but not too slutty for girls was apparent in careful negotiations and intra-actions of human and non-human elements, such as body poses, skirts, relationship status, displays next to young people of other sex and transgressive behaviours (the latter when constructing the unacceptable Other girls). Being pretty for boys under the heterosexual gaze was felt as a pressure by most girls in our study. Boys too confirmed and reinforced these powerful dynamics. In addition, as previous research noted (Manago, 2013), boys were rewarded for bodily displays of tough masculinity (e.g., going to the gym, toned body and six-pack abs, posing with other male friends, doing sports). However, as some girls noticed, there was some preoccupation with choosing the "right" self-displays on social media for boys, in contradiction with the discourse of the "careless boys" not bothered with girl-like preoccupation over appearance.

The construction of norm-breaking category of gay as pejorative has been used as powerful discoursive tool for policing masculinity, as previous research noted (Lahelma, 2002; Ringrose & Rawling, 2015). The same mechanism is found in homophobic (and racial prejudice) discourses sometimes reproduced by young people in our study:

> Some enemies from my school, who call me 'steel sponge'. A boy said that my hair looks like a 'steel sponge' and I said, it's better to have a 'steel sponge hair' than to have a gay haircut[6] (boys, 11-12, class AB). However, this non-normative category is constructed differently in girls' discourses about the "cute gays": They're kind of sissy, super cute, they're not like those boys that come commenting (girls, 13-14, class AB).

We did not, at this point, engage in a vast discussion of class and race, as these issues deserve a more in-depth consideration given their utmost relevance for the Brazilian society and culture. We did notice that class differences in our study were constructed in how young people from different backgrounds cared about material elements as signifiers of status: *I am ashamed of a photo from 2 years ago that showed a dirty wall from home, my dad hadn't cleaned it yet. Once I took a picture where my nephew's slippers had been thrown in the corner of the photo* (boys, 11-12, class C). In another example, boys discussing some girls' posing for pictures with clothes from expensive stores (boys, 15-17, class C) indicates the idea of wanting to transcend limiting material conditions (than their socioeconomic background normally allows).

Conclusions

Overall, our study showed a powerful reinforcement and reconstruction of the heterosexual matrix, although some pushes towards changes were apparent, such as girls revolting against the pressure of having to appear perfect all the time, of needing to have specific body types in order to be considered attractive and suitable matches. In other instances, girls were expressing positive opinions of "cute guys, kinda gay" who show nicer behaviours on social media as opposed to the brute, aggressive types of "other guys" (i.e., the tough masculine ones). Similar contradictions within the continuous representation of heterosexuality were noted by Ridder and Van Bowel (2013) in their analyses of young people commenting each other's pictures on social media as a gendered practice. With SNSs becoming important stages for negotiations of gender and sexualities, the continuous endeavour of analysing young people's practices related to self-expression online is necessary for shedding light on how gender norms and stereotypes are reinforced or transgressed. And finally, our article aims to contribute to amplifying the focus on Latin American countries and their specific processes related to young people embracing mobile technologies and social media, taking into account both local contexts and dominant discourses around gender and sexuality.

Notes

1. The project developed in partnership with the Latin American School of Social Sciences (FLASCO) in Buenos Aires. In Brazil, the project was carried out in collaboration with Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (CEBRAP). The Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society (Cetic.br) is a department of the Brazilian Network Information Center, NIC.br. Cetic.br is responsible for the production of studies on the use of and access to ICT in Brazil. More information available at www.cetic.br.
2. The fieldwork was conducted by the Brazilian Research Institute Ibope Inteligência.
3. For more information on the Brazilian Economic Classification Criteria, see www.abep.org/Servicos/Download.aspx?id=11

4. "Pegar" literally means "to catch" and "pegador" is used to describe a person that hooks up with many people, commonly used to refer to ladies' men. The expression also connotes the objectification of those that are "caught" by the "pegador".
5. Funkeiro/funkeira (Brazilian Portuguese) is the person who enjoys funk music
6. "Bombril" refers to a Brazilian brand of steel sponge used for cleaning. This expression is pejoratively used to refer to afro hair.

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