

GENDER ROLES AND STEREOTYPES ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Alexandra-Mihaela JIGĂU¹

Abstract: Social media has become a significant agent of socialization in recent years and it can be seen especially in the way people conceptualize certain topics. This study explores young people's opinions of gender roles and stereotypes as portrayed on social media, but also the ways in which these platforms can influence their expectations of themselves or those around them, through a qualitative research, being used the semi-structured interviews technique. Ten subjects participated - an equal number of women and men - aged between 20 and 27 years old, that are frequent users of social media platforms. Influencers were also included in the study to provide a better understanding into the use of social media. The research focused on several key themes, such as general use of social media platforms, representations of gender roles and stereotypes on social media, gender-based expectations and the impact of social media on young people from the perspective of gender roles and stereotypes. The main findings indicate that social media contains a large variety of gender roles and stereotypes, but the influence on the subjects varies by gender: women experience a greater social pressure to conform to certain gender roles and stereotypes, compared to men. However, the overall results highlight that, for the participants involved, these influences are not perceived as overwhelming.

Keywords: social media, gender stereotypes, gender roles, social media impact.

Résumé : Les réseaux sociaux sont devenus un agent de socialisation majeur ces dernières années, ce qui se reflète notamment dans la manière dont les individus conceptualisent certains sujets. Cette étude explore les opinions des jeunes concernant les rôles de genre et les stéréotypes tels qu'ils sont présentés sur les réseaux sociaux, ainsi que les façons dont ces plateformes peuvent influencer leurs attentes envers eux-mêmes ou envers leur entourage. Il s'agit d'une recherche qualitative basée sur la technique des entretiens semi-directifs. Dix personnes ont participé à l'étude – un nombre égal de femmes et d'hommes – âgées de 20 à 27 ans, toutes utilisatrices fréquentes des plateformes de réseaux sociaux. Des influenceurs ont également été inclus dans l'échantillon afin de mieux comprendre l'usage des réseaux sociaux. La recherche s'est concentrée sur plusieurs thèmes clés : l'utilisation générale des réseaux sociaux, les représentations des rôles de genre et des stéréotypes sur ces plateformes, les attentes liées au genre, ainsi que l'impact des réseaux sociaux sur les jeunes du point de vue des rôles et stéréotypes de genre. Les principaux résultats indiquent que les réseaux sociaux véhiculent une grande variété de rôles et de stéréotypes de genre. Toutefois, l'influence exercée varie selon le genre : les femmes subissent une pression sociale plus forte pour se conformer à certains rôles et stéréotypes

¹ Master's student, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Political Science, 050663 Bucharest, Romania, e-mail: alexandrajigau3@gmail.com

de genre que les hommes. Cependant, les résultats globaux montrent que, pour les participants, ces influences ne sont pas perçues comme écrasantes.

Mots-clés : médias sociaux, stéréotypes de genre, rôles de genre, l'impact des médias sociaux.

Rezumat: Social media a devenit un agent important de socializare în ultimii ani, lucru vizibil mai ales în modul în care oamenii conceptualizează anumite subiecte. Lucrarea de față explorează opiniile tinerilor cu privire la rolurile de gen și stereotipurile prezentate în social media, dar și modurile în care aceste platforme pot influența așteptările pe care le au față de ei înșiși sau față de cei din jur, printr-o cercetare calitativă, folosind tehnica interviurilor semi-structurate. La studiu au participat zece subiecți – un număr egal de femei și bărbați – cu vârste cuprinse între 20 și 27 de ani, utilizatori frecvenți ai platformelor de social media. În eșantion au fost incluși și influenceri, pentru a obține o înțelegere mai profundă a utilizării social media. Cercetarea a urmărit câteva teme principale: utilizarea generală a platformelor de social media, reprezentările rolurilor de gen și ale stereotipurilor de gen în mediul online, așteptările legate de gen, precum și impactul rețelelor sociale asupra tinerilor din perspectiva rolurilor și stereotipurilor de gen. Principalele rezultate arată că rețelele sociale conțin o mare varietate de roluri și stereotipuri de gen, însă influența acestora asupra subiecților variază în funcție de gen: femeile resimt o presiune socială mai mare de a se conforma anumitor roluri și stereotipuri de gen, în comparație cu bărbații. Cu toate acestea, rezultatele generale subliniază că, pentru participanții implicați, aceste influențe nu sunt percepute ca fiind covârșitoare.

Cuvinte cheie: social media, stereotipuri de gen, roluri de gen, impactul social media.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to understand how young people acknowledge and perceive gender roles and stereotypes, but also to see their perspective on what is promoted on social media in terms of gender. In the following pages I will present a short literature review of studies and articles about gender roles and stereotypes, their relations with the media and other important sociological concepts, complemented by data from a qualitative study conducted for the bachelor's thesis.

In recent years, social media has become an important source of information for people. Considering the socialization process, social media has a great influence as an agent of socialization, particularly in shaping opinions, attitudes and behaviours, especially among teens. Their identity is increasingly shaped by social media through the content published on applications such as Instagram, TikTok or YouTube. The content regarding the way an individual should behave or think based on being a “woman” or “a man” is prominent on social media, and a clear example in this regard is Andrew Tate, known for promoting the “alpha male” style that involves toxic masculinity, sexism and misogyny. Recent studies show that young boys' attitudes are influenced by this kind of ‘manfluencer’ – “internet personalities who weaponize highly performative and extremist notions of masculinity, and who promote regressive, sexist ideas about women” (Wescott, Roberts & Zhao, 2024, pp. 167-168). This study reveals that 30 women who work as teachers in public and private Australian schools have

reported that boys tend to have more sexist and misogynist behaviours towards them or other girl students if they watch ‘manfluencers’ like Andrew Tate.

Moreover, gender has become a major word that can be interpreted as having a pejorative meaning and used as an “ideological weapon” for children’s wellbeing (Pandea, Grzmeny & Keen, 2020). A similar view was also used as a premise in Romania, in 2020, to prohibit the “gender ideology” in Romanian schools and universities, but the law proposed by some members of the Parliament was not validated by the president.

2. Sociological concepts

The following section includes definitions of the key concepts used to support the study, and one of the concepts is that of role. Rodat (2017) explains that roles, especially gender roles, are determined by socialization and by the individual as a “social actor”. Primary socialization is an important factor since an individual does assimilate pivotal norms and values during this stage of the socialization process. Therefore, individuals can find certain roles to be “normal,” such as how gender roles are presented in the society – as roles performed by women and roles performed by men – which are considered “natural” (Bourdieu, 2005, apud Rodat, 2017). Gender roles “are different from one culture to another and they refer to those behaviours considered to be appropriate and acceptable for the members of every category of gender (men, respectively women)” (Rodat, 2017, p. 273).

These aspects can easily lead to stereotyping. A stereotype refers to what is thought of a certain category of individuals, based on “stenciled images [...] in the sense that they are not based on direct, recent observation of phenomenon, but on a priori ways of thinking” (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998, p. 603). Rodat (2017) highlights two components of stereotypes: descriptive – attitudes and behaviours that men and women should have –, and prescriptive – rules, norms, traditional values regarding men and women from the perspective of gender.

2.1. Sex vs. Gender

The second wave of feminism helped to clarify the conceptual differences between sex and gender (Dragomir & Miroiu, 2002), with these concepts being defined in numerous ways. According to Giddens (2010), sex is defined as anatomical and physiological differences which define a man’s and a woman’s body”, while gender is defined as “psychological, social and cultural differences between men and women that are socially constructed” (p. 438); therefore, a person’s gender can be different from their sex.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has a similar view and defines sex as the biological and physiological characteristics that differentiate males from females, “such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc.”, while gender refers to “the socially constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men” (Council of Europe, n.d.).

However, The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines these concepts in a much extended way, saying that sex “refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as female or male” and that “these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, but these characteristics tend to differentiate humans as females or males” (EIGE, n.d.). Gender refers to “the social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male” (EIGE, n.d.) and to the relationships between people, these being socially constructed and learned through socialization. Therefore, gender determines how men and women should behave, hence the inequalities faced in most societies (opportunities, access to resources, activities and responsibilities undertaken by men and women). EIGE also mentions gender being only a criterion for broader analysis, other criteria being socio-cultural status, ethnicity, race, age etc., thus it is also brought to attention the intersectional component.

Gender can be *practiced* in different ways, from one culture to another, as it has been shown since the earliest studies. For example, Margaret Mead (1935) compares three primitive societies – Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli – where men and women do not have the traditionally assigned roles. The Arapesh men and women show ‘maternal’ and ‘feminine’ traits, while the Mundugumor men and women show traits that are rather ‘aggressive’; the Tchambuli men and women have ‘reversed’ roles, where women are the ‘dominant’ partners and men are the ‘emotionally dependent’ partners (Mead, 1935, p. 38). Therefore, Mead tries to explain that these traits, norms, values etc. are determined by the culture of a society, not by biological factors. Giddens (2010) also explains that most differences between men and women do not come from biology, and for that reason many researchers tried to study gender roles and gender identity through theories of learning.

In addition, it cannot be denied that social norms and societal values impose that gender is binary - masculine and feminine - ignoring those who do not identify as either. Traditionally, as it was also shown earlier, gender determines inequality which usually affects women (Pandea, Grzemny & Keen, 2020, p. 35). “Therefore, women’s inferiority is not natural, it derives from this hierarchical binarism invented by the patriarchy with the aim of promoting masculine authority” (Dragomir & Miroiu, 2002, p. 157).

With regard to gender as a social construct, Pandea, Grzemny and Keen (2020) introduce the concept of *gender awareness*: how an individual sees themselves or those around them. Usually, as shown before, gender tends to be categorised in masculine and feminine, although it is more complex. Additionally, the authors emphasize on the fact that gender can be expressed both consciously and unconsciously (Pandea, Grzemny & Keen, 2020).

2.2. Doing gender

West & Zimmerman (1987) came up with the concept of ‘doing gender’, which refers to gender as a ‘routine’: practicing gender through systematic and

methodical activities that are either masculine or feminine (p. 126). Every individual practice gender by wearing certain clothes, behaving in specific ways or having traits associated with a particular sex category. Individuals give meaning to sex and gender; therefore, these can be understood as socially constructed concepts (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Critics of this perspective, such as Judith Butler, do not agree completely because of the masculine-feminine binarity that the article highlights and suggests the term of ‘undoing gender’. Others believe that studies should diminish gender differences, not enhance the differences regarding how men and women react in social situations (Rodat, 2017). West and Zimmerman responded saying that ‘doing gender’ is an ongoing process, and the placing of individuals in a masculine or feminine category represents the social construction of gender. Those who do not identify with any category can be placed in a category of ‘repracticing gender’ (Rodat, 2017).

2.3. Socialization

Every individual is influenced by attitudes, norms, values of a society, and assimilates those through a process called socialization. Giddens (2010) defines socialization as the process where a child becomes an individual aware of themselves, “well informed and accustomed to the manners of the culture they were born into” (p. 158). This process takes place throughout an individual’s entire life, influenced by various agents of socialization, such as family, peer groups, school, and mass media.

Theories of cultural influence suggest that socialization is the most important factor behind differences between the sexes. If biology would have been the core of these differences, all societies should have been the same (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998). However, as highlighted earlier in Margaret Mead’s article (1935), culture plays a key role in determining gender roles.

Giddens draws attention to the fact that functionalists favoured the theory of gender socialization, where boys and girls learn gender roles through “positive or negative sanctions, applied social forces which rewards or restrain the behaviour” (2010, p. 439). In this way, children learn roles that align with their biological sex – otherwise, they may be considered deviants. Hence, agents of socialization are expected to maintain the social order regarding how individuals perform gender roles (Giddens, 2010).

2.4. Mass media and social media

Mass media is an agent of socialization that has become increasingly important, especially with the rise of the Internet. Wood (1994) shows that mass media perpetuates a distorted vision of men and women through various gender stereotypes. It is necessary to examine how gender stereotypes have been perpetuated over the years to understand the importance of social media, and for this reason, a few examples from the traditional media will be described. For example, the stereotype that girls/women are not good at mathematics was

perpetuated even by the company that produced the Barbie doll: in 1992, Mattel released a talking doll that said phrases about how difficult mathematics classes are (*Mattel Offers Trade-In*, 1992, apud Wood, 1994, p. 33).

Television series promoted men as serious, confident, strong, and smart, while other movies from that time reinforced the idea of 'extreme masculinity', portraying men as sexually aggressive, violent, and independent (Wood, 1994, p. 32). Furthermore, Grünberg (2005) analyses three Romanian news television channels and observes differences in how men and women were portrayed at the beginning of the 2000s: women were usually represented as victims of domestic violence (38%), dependent on men (30%), and as mothers (8%); men were represented as aggressors (3%), leaders (31%) or head of family (18%) (p. 69).

Wood (1994, p. 35) also reveals other gender stereotypes presented in the media, such as the man who always saves the woman from danger - for example, the story of "Sleeping Beauty" -, or the woman who tries to clean but Mr. Clean comes to help her with a cleaning product. Additionally, there is the stereotype of the woman being responsible for domestic chores, while the man is the provider. This stereotype can be seen also in the Romanian society, and The National Institute of Statistics [INS] shows that in 2020, among the inactive population aged 20 to 64 years who manage domestic chores in the household, 39,1 percent were women, while only 3,1 percent were men (INS, 2021). Therefore, it can be well observed that there are still significant differences in how domestic chores are shared within households, leading to inequality.

The relationships between men and women are deeply stereotypical as well. Wood (1994) brings to attention another well-known story for children – "Little Mermaid", where Ariel abandons her identity to be with the prince. Mass media, especially in the 80s, in response to the feminist movement, continued to promote traditional gender roles where women were mostly secondary characters despite the movie genre (Wood, 1994, p. 34).

Social media platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, work in the same manner as traditional media and have the potential to influence users' behaviour, cultural standards or other norms. Therefore, social media can promote 'social comparison' which involves preoccupation with someone's physical aspect (Santoniccolo et al, 2023, p. 7). Women are more predisposed to sexualization and objectification, whereas men are less affected, as revealed by Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso and Rollè (2023).

Social media also promotes many of these gender roles and stereotypes. One study shows that selfies uploaded on Instagram can contain even more gender stereotypes in terms of how individuals express themselves in the pictures: females were more likely "to emulate the more traditionally feminine ideals" (Döring, Reif, & Poeschl, 2016, apud. Fernandez & Menon, 2022, p. 124). Another study involving a sample of 797 adolescents who use Facebook (429 females), aged 12 to 17, from Spain, shows that the participants tend not to present themselves in a gender-stereotypical way on the social media platform (Oberst, Renau, Chamarro & Carbonell, 2016). However, this tendency is more pronounced among females.

In the following pages I will extend the discussion regarding the impact of social media on gender stereotypes and gender roles representation with data from the study that I conducted for my bachelor's thesis. I will shortly describe the methodology used for my research and I will explain the main results.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research-gap

Although some studies emphasised the influence of social media in perpetuating gender stereotypes and roles, this area still requires further attention, particularly since teens tend to use social media platforms from a young age. This means that they are susceptible to internalizing those gender stereotypes and roles, which will later transpose into their adult life through socialization. This process can also be accelerated by content creators (*influencers*) who perpetuate these gender stereotypes and roles, whether consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, as it will also be shown in the following pages, social media represents most of the time only men and women, which strengthens the concept of gender as binary.

Unfortunately, research on this subject often lacks an intersectional perspective, which would provide a more in-depth perspective of the matter – for example, to see how white heterosexual people – considered ‘the norm’ – experience gender stereotypes and roles compared to Roma people who are a part of the LGBTQAI+ community. This is only one example, but it is important to emphasize that there could be nuances when we take into consideration multiple aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality etc., and the system in which these interact, which is why it is important to have a comprehensive approach into this phenomenon. The study did not fully explore this subject at the time of research, but nonetheless it is a phenomenon that needed to be addressed. Therefore, such a study is useful to, at least, fill in some gaps in this area of research and set the framework for future research.

3.2. Objectives

The general objective is to explore in depth how gender roles and stereotypes on social media influence young people's attitudes and behaviours. More specific objectives include:

1. To determine which social media platforms are most frequently used by young people and assess their impact.
2. To identify the traditional gender roles and stereotypes present on social media platforms.
3. To analyse the effects of gender stereotypes on social media platforms on young people/users.
4. To analyse the effects of gender roles present on social media platforms on young people's behaviour, values and attitudes.

3.3. Research questions

1. What types of gender stereotypes and roles are promoted on social media, and what are the effects on young people?
2. How do social media platforms influence the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and roles?

3.4. Sample

A qualitative research method was adopted, using a semi-structured interview guide to collect data. The sample consisted of ten participants, five males and five females, aged between 20 and 27 years, that are frequent social media users. Therefore, it was more likely to obtain a relevant opinion regarding social media influence on gender roles and stereotypes. Residence was not considered a relevant factor in this study. The inclusion of content creators in the sample provided a broader perspective on the issue.

The interviews were conducted between March and May 2024, both online - via Discord and Zoom, and in person. Participants gave their consent to participate in the interviews and to have them recorded. Participants were informed that their responses would be anonymised. On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Table 1. List of respondents who participated at interviews

Subject code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Level of education (completed)	Interview duration
S1	Male	22 years old	Student	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	56 minutes
S2	Female	24 years old	HR	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	59 minutes
S3	Male	25 years old	IT	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	56 minutes
S4	Female	21 years old	Student	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	59 minutes
S5	Female	22 years old	Assistant manager	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	79 minutes
S6	Male	22 years old	Call center	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	45 minutes
S7	Male	25 years old	Marketing, content creator	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	70 minutes
S8	Male	27 years old	Technical analyst, content creator, comedian	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	87 minutes
S9	Female	26 years old	NGO coordinator	Tertiary education (Bachelor's degree)	55 minutes
S10	Female	21 years old	Student	Upper-secondary education (High-school degree)	58 minutes

Source: created by the author

4. Results

4.1. Social media usage and impact

In terms of social media usage, it was found that out of ten respondents, five use social media primarily in a passive manner, which means that they either do not post content on those platforms or do so very infrequently:

"I do not post anything or I post very rarely, I am not very active on social media from this point of view" (S3, M, 25 years old).

The other five respondents answered that they are active users, regularly posting pictures, videos or other content. Two of them are content creators on YouTube, which means that they are very active. S8 (M, 27 years old) shares not only YouTube videos, but also reels (on Instagram), along with photographs of his YouTube content or his stand-up events. S7 (M, 25 years old) states:

"Generally, especially because of my job, I must be online, and I had to be online in the last ten years (...) as of implication... yes. I like to participate in anything that involves debate in general on social media."

Based on respondents' answers, it was determined that the dominant functions of social media are entertainment and communication, while the informational function was mentioned by only two respondents. The entertainment function can be accomplished through platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, and the communication function is commonly facilitated through Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

Moreover, the respondents were also asked about what social media platforms they use and how frequently. All respondents answered that they use Instagram daily, therefore the relevance of this platform can be deduced as being highly important. In addition, TikTok is also a widely used platform among the study participants. According to the respondents, the same trend applies to the younger generations, in general, emphasizing that this happens because the platforms are popular and easy to use. Through Instagram, for example, it is easier to interact with other people and with influencers that tend to post frequently. The same can be said about TikTok, which also has a very engaging way of being used through its short-clips format. However, Facebook is less popular among them, as it is primarily used by older generations.

The impact of social media can have both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects imply better communication between people from different places, but it can also be a place where individuals are more likely to critique and express hateful comments since it can be easier to hide someone's identity. Moreover, the time spent on these platforms can also have a significant impact: for example, on average, the respondents spend at least three hours per day on social media. Another important aspect is socialization.

As mentioned earlier, social media is an indispensable influence in socialization the process, since it is a mean of forming opinions, attitudes, and other behaviours of people from a very young age:

“There were debates about women’s rights, equality between women and men and I think by participating we all have the chance to reach a common point in regard to sensible subjects, like your thesis.” (S7, M, 25 years old)

“Especially when it comes to talking about people who, at a certain age, are particularly susceptible to create a certain opinion for them about society, about values... and the sentiments on traditionalism-conservatism, but also regarding progressists, tend to intensify.” (S2, F, 24 years old)

Here, influencers play an important role since they present an image of themselves that can be perceived as astonishing. Respondents mentioned that young people may imitate or aspire to imitate these influencers, which can be damaging when it comes to shaping an individual’s personality. It was also mentioned a pressure to conform to societal standards, which influences the sense of self of individuals and other aspects of everyday life:

“It can be bad for adolescents who still have not developed their personality and then they are exposed to this kind of content. And it can affect their self-esteem. This pressure that social media exercises on us, it makes us do obsessive shopping, for example, to buy ourselves clothes or jewellery or to go at salons and do all kinds of procedures” (S9, F, 26 years old)

4.2. Gender roles and social media

A section of the interview was dedicated to gender roles. Firstly, participants were asked about their perceptions of femininity and masculinity, and it was clear that they identified a division between ‘what is feminine’ and ‘what is masculine’ and it was effortless for them to identify associated gender roles:

“Femininity and masculinity are not bad things themselves, but we see them as ideals.” (S4, F, 21 years old)

“These were put on women, as well as on men. I mean, somehow it seems to me that how we were divided in terms of work division 15.000 years ago, more or less, we remained there. We try to evolve a little, but we are still in this type of work division.” (S2, F, 24 years old)

The respondents described these concepts as harmful, forming barriers and labels for genders and reinforcing traditional gender roles. However, there was a respondent that implied that there are certain roles that can only be performed by either men or women, which encourages those traditional gender roles:

“For example, in construction firms, the people who actually do the physical work on the site are mostly men, simply because men have greater physical strength and endurance, a physiological built that helps in this regard. On the

other hand, women are very good in the HR department, being very good in communication and interpersonal relationships.” (S1, M, 22 years old)

Some respondents indicated that there has been some improvement in terms of how traditional gender roles are perpetuated in the society, therefore they do not count as much in how an individual should behave solely on their gender:

“It seems to me that the differences are starting to fade. More masculine or feminine behaviours are starting to be accepted across different sex and gender categories.” (S4, F, 21 years old)

“Recently I noticed that people are not that narrow-minded anymore and does not say anymore that for you to be feminine, for example, you have to wear heels or a dress or I don’t know” (S10, F, 21 years old).

Secondly, the social media content related to gender roles can be divided into two categories; the content that promotes traditional gender roles and the content that rejects these roles. The respondents answered that the content that rejects traditional gender roles exists, but it is not as popular. The first category, from the respondents’ perspective, can influence teenagers especially because it promotes grandiose lifestyles or behaviours that people should adopt ‘because they are a man/woman’.

“So, in terms of social media content, I think the content that reinforces gender roles is very strong. And I would say it particularizes them in a way that makes them even more toxic than they were before.” (S8, M, 27 years old)

‘It appeared to me on TikTok all sorts of influencers, micro-influencers mostly, because they didn’t have many followers, that worked with this stuff. They were teaching you how to be feminine, how to behave in a certain context, you must do that, you have to do the other, how to do make-up... And the same, men that were giving advice, how to be a man, like to go to the gym and make money.’ (S10, F, 21 years old)

This reinforces the socialization function that social media holds for young people in general, where they are taught women must be gentle, delicate, well-arranged, and men are expected to be strong, avoid wearing makeup, are refrain from having ‘a feminine look’:

“The man must be as serious as possible, not to do make-up or to dress, I don’t know, in a feminine style. The woman should be as cute as possible, to talk on a nice tone, to be endearing, with a sweet attitude.” (S6, M, 22 years old)

“These roles and standards that we have look tidy, to be good looking, perfect nails, to go to the gym or do sport or be on a diet to be slim, but at the same time curvy. And the men to be all worked up at the gym and to be big.” (S9, F, 26 years old)

A few interesting details mentioned by some respondents deserve to be highlighted due to their significance. Four respondents discussed the concept of

‘toxic feminism’, defined as how “some women tend to go to an extreme where they want too much, are aggressive and want to be above men”; the other six participants did not mention this aspect.

“The women that take feminism to a very aggressive extreme against men, and they try not to be equal to men, but above them.” (S1, M, 22 years old)

“I appreciate that women want their rights, but at the same time, I don't agree with toxic feminism. In which they want... I don't know... They want too much...” (S5, F, 21 years old)

Another type of content that promotes traditional gender roles involves discussions of ‘masculine energies’ and ‘feminine energies’. Three respondents brought into attention this aspect and said that these terms essentially reinforce the idea that women should handle domestic work and focus on their appearance, while men are expected to provide resources and be assertive—particularly when interacting with women (as women should never be the assertive ones):

“It is also to categorize genders, where the woman has to do domestic work while the man brings in resources in order to be in their energies.” (S2, F, 24 years old)

“Social media also promotes this idea of being in your feminine energy or in your masculine energy, where the woman wants the man to be assertive and have initiative because you have to be in your feminine energy.” (S9, F, 26 years old)

4.3. Gender stereotypes and social media

The respondents also identified numerous stereotypes about men and women, many of which align with the gender roles mentioned earlier. The gender stereotypes about women, in the respondents’ perspective, are the following: to be a caretaker of the home and family, to be sensitive, delicate, considerate, and to refrain from having multiple sexual partners. One participant summarised these views with a clear example:

“... and you have the Barbie doll that cleans up because it gives you all these cleaning supplies, and the Barbie doll which is in a kitchen and cooks, the Barbie doll that has a baby and the Barbie doll that... and in a way all these roles of the Barbie doll are, actually, stereotypes and patriarchal roles” (S9, F, 26 years old).

Gender stereotypes about men include owning a car, being a leader (in the family), providing for the woman or the family, displaying physical strength – often by going to the gym - and avoiding the expression of emotions. Therefore, it can be said that men should emanate power both physically and socially, while women are expected to remain passive.

The respondents were also asked about social media trends, and four of them mentioned Andrew Tate, an influencer known for his controversial opinions

on masculinity, women, and feminism, view that are characterized by sexism and misogyny.

“This movement was assimilated by the incel community, involuntary celibates, which began blaming progressive and feminist movements for their own behaviours and attitudes. Tate perpetuates the most toxic side of gender roles, but these types of movement are not as common in recent years” (S8, M, 27 years old).

They agreed that Tate capitalizes from the vulnerability of individuals with low self-esteem, blaming feminism and ‘the woke movement’ for their struggles. This results in promoting toxic behaviours and attitudes, such as the perceived necessity of women’s subordination to men, which perpetuates traditional gender roles and gender stereotypes.

Another respondent mentioned a trend that was popular at the time on TikTok in Romania, where women used a filter that simulated bruises on their faces and created videos portraying situations such as not having prepared food for their partner, so he was angry when he arrived home and did not find anything on the table. This trend, therefore, served to normalize domestic violence, although it was intended ‘as a joke’. The respondents presented only the negative side effects of social media trends; however, two respondents said that trends can also bring positive effects, such as normalizing showing emotions among men.

4.4. General and beauty standards for men and women

When talking about expected standards for men and women, respondents offered many examples. In the case of men, they mentioned that men are expected not to show emotion, to be physically strong, imposing, to have a certain ‘manly’ way of talking. However, the male respondents noted that they do not necessarily feel obligated to conform to these norms in all situations.

“For men it isn't much of an influence... but it is rather promoted the idea that you have nothing if you don't have money.” (S3, M, 25 years old)

“We can't talk about the same impact as the one on women... I am pretty privileged and if I don't like something I can reject it without problems.” (S7, M, 25 years old)

In the case of women, these expected standards can be numerous, such as avoiding vulgar language, being delicate, sensible, calm, accepting, and respect everyone even in situations where they are not shown respect. Physical appearance is very important in women’s case: they are expected not to have body hair, to wear clothes that are neither too revealing nor ‘too boy-ish’ (at the same time they must be careful when going out in certain clothes), and not to eat too much, as it might negatively affect their appearances.

Lastly, respondents were asked about beauty standards for men and women, and their impact. Some of the responses that highlight the effect these standards have - even on the respondents themselves - are as follows:

"In the back of my mind, they stay there... Because you grow up with them, you interact with them, when you're on social media, or when you are with your friends and they make a joke about these stereotypes and you laugh in that moment maybe, but after that you remain with them and maybe them too" (S10, F, 21 years old);

All respondents agreed that the standards present on social media are unrealistic and can transpose in everyday life. Five respondents mentioned the fact that people are likely to post pictures that highlight their physical qualities, showing themselves 'from the best side'.

"On social media you have to have the best pictures from the best angle" (S8, M, 27 years old).

In the case of men, the respondents are equally divided into two categories: five believe that men are affected by unrealistic beauty standards to the same extent as women, while the other five believe that men are less affected by these standards. However, the latter category mentioned that men are rather affected by other aspects, such as the desire to achieve a high social status through material possessions. At the same time, men are expected to maintain a certain appearance that denotes success, whether through clothing, expensive cars, multiple female partners, or even going to the gym: *"the perfect man that works out, has a four-pack, is 1.90 meters, has beard, nice hair" (S2, F, 24 years old).*

5. Conclusions

All participants in the study use social media platforms frequently, especially Instagram and TikTok, primarily for entertainment and communication purposes. The informative function was mentioned less frequently, although some respondents noted that they follow content related to national and international social events. Social media has a great impact in the socialization process, as it allows users to easily interact and share opinions, ideas, and attitudes. Influencers also have substantial impact within this process.

From the respondents' perspective, gender roles limit men and women from engaging in activities typically associated with the opposite gender. These can be seen in the division of labour or in general expectations placed on individuals based on their gender. However, the interviews reveal that all respondents think of gender from a binary perspective, although not all of them believe that gender is necessarily binary. They identified on social media various traditional gender roles and stereotypes, including through influencers. Gender stereotypes for females seem to be more present on social media, therefore respondents claim that women are more likely to feel pressured to conform to traditional norms. For men, not conforming to those traditional norms does not determine significant consequences.

To conclude, the limitations of the research must be acknowledged: the small number of participants and their specific profiles, being of interest for the

future to develop the sample and use a larger number of participants from a vast variety of socio-professional categories. In this sense, I believe a more intersectional perspective can be used to better represent more categories of individuals and see how gender interacts outside the masculine-feminine binarity, and with other identity elements (ethnicity, race, nationality, age, disability etc.).

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