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The Importance of Belonging: A Study About Positioning Processes in Youths’ Online Communication

Liselotte Eek-Karlsson

Abstract

The aim of this study is to contribute with knowledge of young peoples’ communication in social media. A total of 32 boys and girls aged 14 to 15 years old, from two schools in Sweden, participated in this study. A hermeneutic interpretation process formed the basis of the analysis process. The data were thematized based on patterns found throughout the material. Theoretical perspectives concerning normalization processes related to the use of language were connected to the data to deepen the understanding of themes and patterns. The result shows that there is an ongoing negotiation with reciprocal processes in which both boys and girls have lots of reference points to consider, when they interact online. There are social norms and rules related to the online arena itself, as well as normative expectations connected to gender orders. The gender category is intertwined with sexuality and group hierarchies, which give the youth different power positions to act online.

Keywords

young people, social media, positioning processes, normality, intersectionality

Introduction

Today, online communication is an important arena that constitutes everyday life for young people (The Internet Foundation in Sweden, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017; Swedish Media Council, 2017). Most young people all over the world can make their voices heard through texts or photos, and in this way, they become agents in their own online world. They construct multimodal texts, and they experiment with new ways of constructing, manifesting, and communicating their identities, while enhancing their understanding of what digital literacy really means. From this perspective, online communication can be considered as more equal than offline communication. Regardless of background, young people can come together around common interests (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Gee, 2005; Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Vigmo & Lantz-Andersson, 2013).

In time of increasing diversity, research on young people’s inclusion and exclusion processes in their everyday life is highly relevant. For many boys and girls, adolescence is a time for creating and confirming social alliances. A fundamental endeavor in these processes is to belong to a community (both online and offline) and feel a sense of belonging to this community. The concept belonging deals with meeting other people and decide if they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the community, that is, whether they are regarded as “us” or “them” (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Thus, belonging also signifies political aspect, for it points to norms, values, restrictions, and regulations (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Trudeau (2006) stresses that if we want to understand the social control of space we have to understand how belonging operates. In all practices, both offline and online there are inclusive and exclusive processes that deal with struggles about power, popularity, and status. Social communities do not solely satisfy the human endeavor to belong and become a part of a community; they develop social identities, too. It can also be verbalized that the process of belonging also concerns how social locations and the constructions of identity are assessed and valued by the self and others in different ways—if it is seen as good or bad and this relates to attitudes and ideologies. Different discourses construct the identity more or less inclusive (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Related to this study, the interest can be articulated as how social categories are embedded in power relations and how these work with or against each other in an online context.

There are some differences between online and offline communication, which have to be conceptualized. Online, the interactions mostly take place with a mediated face and often the communication is asynchronous.
online identity, writing and/or publishing photos become essential (Sundén, 2003; Thomas, 2007). Visibility, duration, proliferation, and the possibility to be anonymous are other aspects specific for online interactions (boyd, 2008; Shariff, 2008). Because of the online characteristic, lots of examples for being a girl or a boy become visible. Through the youths’ interactions the online practice is developed, but at the same time it also creates meaning. The informal learning develops deals with values in human communication and how these values are put into action in their interactions. Some positions are more powerful and placed in the center of the community, while others are marginalized with less power. By these processes, both normality and deviation are constructed (Kumashiro, 2002). To be included in the peer group, an awareness of the online characteristics, as well as of different social norms, is important. This article aims to contribute with knowledge of youths’ communication in social media by focusing on positioning processes in their discussions about online interactions. The following research question is asked:

In what ways are boys’ and girls’ online acting spaces affected by their position in the peer group?

**Theoretical Framework**

As mentioned above, this study focuses on positioning processes emphasized in boys’ and girls’ discussions about their online interactions. Through language, they interpret the world both offline and online. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) stress that depending on how language is used, different discourses are developed in the social practice. By the young people’s acts online, the construction of what it means to be a “normal” young boy or a girl become visible. Normalization processes affect the naturalization of some identities and estranging of others, for example, on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, or disability. Kumashiro (2002) means that otherness and deviation often are known and maintained in contrast to the norm (Kumashiro, 2002). In this study, normality is seen as a negotiated contextual process, that is, the construction of normality depends on the subjects involved in the context in which the negotiation takes place. The constitution of social identities, social relationships and moral opinions, and so on are a result of these negotiations that may lead to both inequality and social stratification (Foucault, 1972; Kumashiro, 2002). Normalization processes result by extension in a common sense, which gives a feeling of comfort. Commonsensical ideas help us to “make sense of and feel at ease with things that get repeated in our everyday lives” (Kumashiro, 2004, p. xxxv). Related to this study, common sense helps the youths to experience what it means to communicate with friends in social media to become included in the peer group.

This study primarily focuses on highlighting how boys and girls identify and negotiate their positions in the peer group. This study has an intersectional point of departure to take a step from looking at power relations as dichotomous and binary, where groups appear as antagonistic toward each other. Crenshaw (1995) first used the concept when she studied violations against women of color. She found that discrimination follows a pattern of intersecting categories, in this case racialized ethnicity, social class, and gender. Kofoed (2008) states that the concept of intersectionality “is an endeavour to conceptualize the blending of categories and indicates how the effects of categories cannot be understood separately / . . . / often it will be a matter of the mingling of the constituent effects of the categories in question” (p. 417). The youth in this study are not categorized as exclusively boys or girls. The gender category is intertwined with other categories that affect their position in the peer group and the power to act, both offline and online.

**Research Methodology and Data Collection**

Primary data was collected through pair interviews conducted in two classes in two different schools in a medium-sized city in Sweden. The purpose was not to conduct a comparative analysis; instead, the focus was to get a broad empirical material. In order not to influence the choice of the participants, the schools were randomly selected (Bryman, 2016). Initially, the school principals were contacted to give permission to conduct the investigation. The principal and responsible teachers at each school selected the participating classes. The reason for choosing the two classes was their overall interest in discussing, for them, important questions. Initially, the researcher visited each class to give information about the investigation. Before the interviews, the researcher participated approximately 40 hr in each class to get to know the youths as individuals, but also to get an insight in different group processes. Finally, four boys and eight girls from Grade 8 (15 years old) participated (of 23) and in the other class, nine boys and 11 girls from Grade 7 participated (of 24) in the investigation. A list of questions and topics were constructed that had to be covered during the interviews, but the interviews can be seen as conversations with the endeavor to let the youths, as freely as possible, describe the experiences of their everyday life in social media. The youths themselves demarcated the phenomenon. When needed, the researcher asked question to deepen the understanding. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized by the researcher. In total, the material consists of 12 hr and 38 min recordings. Concerning ethical considerations, both parents and youths received information about the research project before it started. Participating youths obtained permission to participate from their parents. They were informed about confidentiality and anonymity, that is, neither city, school, nor participants would be revealed. All the participants got fictive names. They were also
informed about the possibility to end their participation whenever they wanted during the interviews (All European Academies, 2017).

A hermeneutic interpretation process formed the basis for the analysis. It can also be regarded as a thematic analysis, which is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis began with several readings of the transcriptions to get an overall understanding and to look for different positioning processes. Thereafter, the data were thematized based on patterns found in the material. The analysis involved a moving back and forward between the entire material, the coded patterns, and the analysis that was produced. This phase can be seen as a deconstruction; the thematic analysis was driven by the research question, that is, all quotations concerning interactions between peers were put together. Although the project was guided by the overall research question, it was also refined as the project progressed. To get new insights of the different themes, theories were connected to the data. Åsvoll (2013) states that “the theory or the theoretical perspectives can be applied as an explicit and directive tool in the selection of data and interpretations” (p. 290). The theoretical framework helped to find qualities in the themes and patterns that were found and eventually a new and deepened understanding of youths’ online positioning processes and how discourses operate in a social practice was developed. On one hand, the purpose was to learn from the youths, the way they experience their online interactions, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience. On the other hand, by using theories a new and deeper understanding was developed. A central point in qualitative studies deals with generalization. The concept “internal validity” highlights the relation between theory and empirical data (Bryman, 2016). To connect the empirical data to a theoretical framework to give meaning to the content is of high relevance in the analysis process. In this way, the specific context in this study may be understood at a more principle level and consequently, the result may be valid outside the specific context by means of the theoretical framework.

Finding

The text below are thematized, based on conditions that affect the online acting space.

The Importance of Acting Normally Correct Online

The online arena works as a leisure center for most of the youths in this study. They want to be informed about what is happening in the peer group and therefore it is of great importance to join the same social media as the peers. The number of online friends differs between the youths; some have 50 to 60, while others have 500. Three boys did not use social media at all. Nevertheless, most of the youths describe a lot of advantages of online interactions. But, there are also social norms and rules connected to the online arena, irrespective who you are, that are important to be aware of in order not to be insulted in different ways. Normative expectations, connected to different social categories in the peer group, also affect the online acting space. Important aspects for being included in the community are both to follow the social norms and to submit to the social control (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The control system is effective online, because of the visibility and proliferation possibilities.

General Norms and Rules Online

A main reason for being online is to get attention from friends, especially close friends. Fredrik (Grade 8) explains that “everyone wants attention and to be ‘liked’ by everyone and everything . . . otherwise programs like Big Brother wouldn’t work.” But it has to be positive attention, that is, attention that preserves and consolidates a good reputation. Carl (Grade 7) is completely aware of what it is all about. He states that “social media is mostly about the outside . . . your outward face in society, not much about the inside at all . . . about making a good image.” The “like”-button is central in the interactions. It is an easy way to affirm each other. It feels good to get “likes” and if someone has been mean you can always look at your “likes.” Ebba (Grade 7) says for example: “if someone has said something stupid to you, in this way you can always improve your self-confidence.” When you get positive attention, it works as a receipt that you are acting in the right way. Online, there are many possibilities to test and challenge normative boundaries, both consciously and unconsciously. Because of the visibility online, there is often an immediate response. There is a balancing act between getting positive attention and avoiding different kinds of exclusive processes. Elin and Johanna (Grade 7) give an example:

Johanna: A girl is having a hard time. She has hurt herself a bit.

Elin: She puts out a bunch of photos . . . her mother is sick . . . her grandfather is sick . . . she is sick. People react to that . . . I feel sorry she wants attention. I think people think so. They write that you are fat because she takes pills. You are so fat, so die, Sabina. / . . . / It seems like she wants to get those comments, that people should feel sorry for her. It’s too bad for her . . . that’s not it. It was just . . . it was too much.

The girl described in the excerpt breaches a social norm that deals with the relation between private and personal content. Being too private and vulnerable is not accepted online, at least not in public. Another social norm deals with honesty. It is important to present oneself in the same way online as offline, for example not publishing “strange” photos of
oneself. Jessica (Grade 7) explains that “it is as if someone would see me in reality . . . this is the kind of photos we publish.”

In the text above, examples of general online rules are given, independent of gender or position in the peer group. But, there are also norms connected to different social categories or positionings that affect the online acting space. The first perspective discussed deals with power orders between groups and their different access to social media.

**Normative Expectations in Relation to Group Membership**

All youths in this study can be seen as part of the same category—they are all young people in Grade 7 or 8 interacting in social media. But the analysis shows that they are constructed in different ways in the same category. They are boys and girls belonging to different peer groups in school. Their social identities are constructed in relation to how they identify themselves or being identified of their peers as a member or not a member of these groups (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Jenkins, 2008; Tajfel, 1981). Most of the youths are connected to each other through a common interest and they develop a shared repertoire within these “communities of practice.” A situated learning appears and they learn from each other how to act as a member of the specific group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For example, they describe themselves as “horse girls,” “football players,” “tough guys,” but also as “outsiders.” A group membership indicates an idea that there is a difference between those who belong to a specific group and those who do not. Often, they talk about them and us. While individual and personal opinions are created about group members, stereotypic and generalized opinions often are created about those who do not belong to the group (Tajfel, 1981).

Related to group affiliations, there are expectations for what kinds of photos that can be published without any risks to be insulted online. Michael, Moa, and Hannes (Grade 7) strongly define themselves as members of specific peer groups. Moa is a “horse girl” who loves horses and she says “I just publish photos when I jump with my horse and nice photos of horses.” Michael is a “skate-boarder” and he has the same opinion “I just publish nice moves when I skate, that’s what I do.” Throughout all the interviews, there are lots of comments about the fear of publishing photos exhibiting one’s body. Hannes (Grade 7) is also a “skate-boarder” and he explains,

Hannes: I don’t want to publish photos of myself
Interviewer: Why not?
Hannes: I don’t know . . . I’m not like that.

Michael, Moa, and Hannes belong to groups that are not expected to publish photos of their bodies and if they would publish such a photo it would be rather scary for them. In their statements it appears that they are acting as expected, that is, they publish photos that are related to their common interest. Their photos do not challenge the prevailing order, instead their online publications strengthen their group membership.

The position in the peer group determines different access to the online arena. Carl and Sebastian (Grade 7) are two “well-behaved” boys who are accepted and respected by peers in the class. They play football and they have, in some way, power to decide themselves how to act online. But they challenge neither the teacher nor the hierarchical order in the class. Neither of them actively participates in the struggle to become popular by their peers. They have each other, and they are aware that they are some sort of outsiders looking at peers acting both offline and online:

Carl: / . . . / those who are popular in society or in school get more likes than an ordinary boy who publishes a normal photo of himself.
Interviewer: Can you be popular through publishing special photos?
Sebastian: Not like that . . .

Because of their position in the peer group, Carl and Sebastian cannot participate in the struggle to become popular by publishing photos of their bodies. The above excerpts are examples of a subjectification and the process of becoming a young person accepted in the peer group. Social norms play an important role in these processes, because a system of norms is an effective tool not only for the controlling of individuals but also for integration and social inclusion (Coleman, 1990; Kumashiro, 2002).

Tom and Martin are also students in Grade 7. They are closed out from social media and it seems that they themselves have chosen to be excluded. They have a very low ranking in the class, which they are fully aware of, and they will not risk being insulted or being even more excluded online. For example, Martin says, “I have only a few friends so I don’t need social media” and interacting online may be dangerous for him. No one will protect him if someone is mean. Tom has the same opinion:

Tom: They (classmates; author’s comment) just care about popularity all the time / . . . / which is completely irrelevant!
Interviewer: Isn’t it important to be popular?
Tom: No!
Interviewer: Why not?
Tom: It’s better to have nice friends / . . . / friends who don’t let me down. Let’s say that I’m in a popular gang (which I’m not) then they abandoned in order to be with other friends . . . the risk for being let down is greater.
Tom and Martin have each other and that is enough. They argue that they do not need social media. This opinion can be related to Gramsci’s (1971) discussion that subordinated groups often are adapted to the prevailing order. They themselves are a part of the structural inequality culture that creates subordination and marginalization. It can be seen as a hegemonic power exercise where the subordinated reproduce dominant relationships not based on force and violence. Instead, there is a fundamental cultural and ideological acceptance. Accepting or not being aware of the oppression leads to facilitating the spreading and fortification of it at different social levels (Gramsci, 1971). Tom and Martin accept being invisible online, and from Kumashiro’s (2002) point of view being invisible is also a form of oppression.

Social norms are constructions that change over time and space. To be a “normal” young person implies being accepted in a specific context. This means that someone has the power to define what is regarded as normal and not normal. To construct a social norm, there have to be deviations (Coleman, 1990; Kumashiro, 2002). To visualize the social norm, the youths demonstrate, through their online comments what is regarded as normality. But, a visual confirmation also appears when they decide to accept or deny a friend’s online request.Fabian is a boy in Grade 7, and he is not so popular in the class. He disturbs the lessons and irritates the peers. In the excerpt below, Henrik (a classmate of Fabian’s) describes why he would never accept a friend request from Fabian:

Interviewer: Have you ever turned down someone?
Henrik: Yes, Fabian.
Interviewer: Why?
Henrik: Because I’m so bothered when he talks in class . . .
Interviewer: How does it feel to turned down someone in the class? Isn’t it mean?
Henrik: Not against Fabian!
Interviewer: Why not?
Henrik: He is mean to others . . . generally irritating . . . he is obnoxious towards peers sometimes . . . I can’t stand him . . .
Interviewer: Then it’s ok not to accept him?
Henrik: yeah . . .

For those who are looked upon, more or less, as deviants there is always a risk being online. Fabian tells me that he does not like social media and because of that he did not want to be interviewed.

Normative Expectations in Relation to Gender

As described above, group belonging is one aspect that affects the online acting spaces. Another aspect deals with gender. To be an appropriate boy or girl that is accepted and respected by peers, it is important to act both in accordance with the prevailing order in the specific online and offline context, and with the overall expectations in society. Hirdman (2003) states that the gender system rests on two principles. The first is that men and women are regarded as separated from each other; they are complementary with different qualities. The other principle deals with a hierarchical order in which men are viewed as the norm connected with the power to construct normality. Some expectations are related to men, while others are linked to women. Caring, sensibility, and focusing on relations are some examples of feminine-coded qualities. Complementary, masculine-coded qualities are rationality, decision ability, and “hardness” (Hirdman, 2003). One example of the disparity between boys and girls manifested in this study is the difference in need for affirmation. Both boys and girls are convinced that girls need more affirmation than boys. Because of that, girls send nice comments to each other all the time. Olivia (Grade 8) and Alice (Grade 7) give some examples:

Alice: / . . . / people for example SMS “How sweet you are!” and “What nice clothes you had on today!”
Olivia: We comment on each other, like “You look so nice today!” . . . You don’t say that in reality, but on the Internet it is not unusual at all . . .

Michael and Sebastian (Grade 7) have explored the difference between girls’ and boys’ different ways of communicating online. Michael says that “boys don’t care as much as girls to become popular. Of course, boys want to be popular / . . . / girls want to compete . . . all of them want to feel that they get attention.” Sebastian adds “boys don’t care so much . . . girls want more self-confidence . . . boys have it.” Isaac (Grade 7) distinguishes himself by saying that “I don’t like . . . I don’t publish my feelings.” Successful boys are acting online in accordance with appropriate masculinity; they are controlled and they do not show vulnerability. These opinions follow the general gender order and are consistent with other studies (Abiala & Hernwall, 2013; Forsman, 2014; Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). The youths’ knowledge is often based on stereotypes and on normative expectations for boys and girls when they perform their gender identity (Harding, 1986; Hirdman, 2003). If a boy publishes photos where they show their body to get likes there is a great risk of being insulted, because these kinds of photos are female-coded and there is a great risk to be looked upon as “gay.” Instead, boys often publish photos where they act; they are “doers.” For girls, it is more accepted to use boys’ acting space, to publish photos when they are acting. This is one example of the hierarchical order between men and women (Hirdman, 2003), that is, boys and girls have different access to each other’s acting space. Olof (Grade 8) explains why he never would publish a photo of his body: “I would be teased by my guy friends . . . be called gay or something like that.” As a boy it is a great risk to be marked as female, and Frida (Grade 7) explains that “girls can write, ‘how cute you are’ every day, but boys think it is more ‘gay’ than girls do.”
Another example of performing masculinity online deals with arguments about accepting or not accepting friend requests. Joseph (Grade 8) is a “tough guy” who does not like school. He has the power to challenge the school system as well as teachers and classmates. To maintain his position, it is important for him to act in an appropriate way, both online and offline. Bill is another student in this class. He is only joining the class in practical school subjects, due to cognitive difficulties. He is marginalized in school and has no friends in the class. Joseph ignores Bill in the classroom and he never talks to him. When I ask Joseph about the reason why he does not accept some friend requests online, he says:

Interviewer: Is there any reason why if someone wants to be friends with you on Facebook . . . is there anyone that you would ignore?
Joseph: Of course, I would ignore certain ones . . . cp-kids.
Interviewer: Who are they then?
Joseph: Bill for example . . .
Interviewer: Why is he a cp-kid?
Joseph: I add most people, but I would never add him.
Interviewer: Why not?
Joseph: You might hate the person or something.

Bill is a boy who needs care and care-taking is an issue suggesting vulnerability and empathy, which are female-coded. To preserve his masculinity Joseph has to be cool, not show himself to be weak. The visibility online reinforces this endeavor. Through all these acts described above there is a learning of defining normality as well as what is normatively correct depending on whether you are a girl or a boy (Harding, 1986; Hirdman, 2003; Kumashiro, 2002).

The Intertwining Between Gender, Sexuality, and Group Status

The participants in this study define themselves as either girls or boys, but within this gender category they perform differently depending on other categories that are intersecting with the gender category, in this case sexuality. Historically and traditionally, there have been different norms and rules related to sexual behavior for men and women. The inequality appears in this study, for example in the boys’ fear of being regarded as gay. There is much research about young people’s sexual identification related to vulnerability both online and offline. It is very shameful for a boy to be looked upon as gay. “Doing” masculinity does not link to homosexuality. The boys are working, more or less actively, with the characteristics involved for becoming a “real” man. In these processes, heterosexuality is a strong marker (Espelage et al., 2008; Friedman et al., 2011; Godley, 2006). Hetero-normativity and masculinity are not only evaluated as important in the youths’ online context, but they are loaded with the necessary power. This means that boys who actively use markers to show their hetero-normativity and masculinity are more likely to be looked upon as real men/boys. Thus, this type of intertwining between sexuality and gender gains hegemony in the peer group (and in society), which leads to less risk of being insulted online. With other words, this intertwining is loaded with sufficient power to guard normality in the peer group.

In contrast to boys, girls in general do not need to focus on hetero-normativity in their online interactions. Instead, they need to adapt and conform to the prevailing view upon girls’/women’s sexuality. For young girls, there is always a risk of having a bad reputation related to sexuality. It is very discreditable to be looked upon as someone who is sexually promiscuous. There is a general opinion in society that a woman who is sexually active is looked upon as “bad” (Crawford & Popp, 2003). This view can be seen as a sexual oppression to remind young girls of their gendered role in the heterosexual interplay (Rahimi & Liston, 2009). Almazan and Bain (2015) point out that the regulation of women’s sexuality is:

a norm for females to position themselves and others in sexual hierarchies, raising regulative discourses around sexuality, appearances and performances in the private space of their friendship groups. (p. 2)

This opinion is common in the girls’ statements. A frequent way is to use the word “slut” when they talk about some girls in school and what kind of photos they publish. It is important to get attention but Sara (Grade 8), for example, would never publish a photo where she exhibits her body to get attention. She is aware of the risks and she says,

this person has got a bad reputation . . . look at her! She would be insulted in school.

In the peer group, some positions are loaded with adequate power to challenge the intertwining between gender and sexuality. The more status the more power to challenge normative boundaries. In this study, the concept status is seen as the rights and obligations tied to a given position in the peer group (Foucault, 1972). Some girls in school are popular, especially among boys, and they have the power to transgress and challenge prevailing norms without risking being insulted, instead the power to act online is reinforced. Stina (Grade 8) explains that “some girls have a kind of status . . . and it’s clear that if they put out such photos they get even more.” Ebba (Grade 7) is of the same opinion:

I think that depends on what kind of photos you publish . . . that’s status. If there is a girl that publishes disgusting photos . . . when she exhibits her body . . . then all the boys are thinking . . . wow . . .

A similar point of view emerges in discussions about boys’ online photos. Some positions among boys are loaded with
power to provoke the prevailing order of how to be an appropriate boy/man without risking being called gay. These boys objectifying their bodies online, which commonly is female-coded:

Interviewer: Girls often publish photos of themselves. Don’t boys do that?
Henrik: Sometimes . . . /if it is a boy who is popular among girls . . . maybe then I would do it often.
Johan: If you are popular . . .

There are hierarchies developed in the classroom and in school based on categories and each category is provided with power. Power is a ticket to interact online and to challenge normality. It is important to mention that this study does not discuss the intertwining between positions in the peer group that underlie the group status in general. The present interest is to show that high status in the peer group is connected to adequate power for challenging normative boundaries online. The result shows that simultaneous processes of power create and preserve relations of superiority and subordination in the peer group.

Concluding Reflection—The Fear of Becoming an Outsider

This study contributes with perspectives on inequalities in youths’ online acting spaces. Social media can not only be regarded from a democratic perspective, it is also an arena for preserving and consolidating the prevailing order in the specific context and in society as a whole. The result also shows that online and offline arenas are intertwined with each other. Hierarchies and power positions developed offline, for example in the classroom, are strong markers both for the online acting space and for being an appropriate boy/girl. Communication in social media is an effective educational practice, because of its characteristics. Hidden discourses or positioning processes become visible online, and because of that, it is an effective tool for both preserving and challenging normality. Through their online interactions both boys and girls learn how to define normality as well as how to regulate who they are and who they supposed to be.

It is important to learn how to act without risks online. During adolescence, there is a great fear of being excluded and of becoming an “outsider.” For people in general, it is very shameful to be excluded publicly, and there is a great risk in challenging the prevailing order online. As Gramsci (1971) highlights when he discusses hegemonic processes in society, it is difficult to transform hierarchies. Hegemonies can be seen as quiet forms of exercising power without using direct violence. Both Gramsci (1971) and Kumashiro (2002) highlight that a subordinated position does not automatically lead to resistance. Through acceptance or unawareness, social differences are preserved. For example, Tom and Martin are aware that peers regard them as some kind of deviants and they have accepted that they do not have access to social media. In order not to risking being insulted, they exclude themselves from interactions in social media. Instead, they argue that social media is something bad and that they do not need it for maintaining friendship.

Common sense (Kumashiro, 2002) appears in the participants’ arguments; that is, some acts are completely fundamental and because of that they do not have to be questioned. For example, when Elin and Johanna discuss a peer who gets negative comments because she is too private online, they mean that she has herself to blame because she does not know the online rules. This argument can be related to Foucault (1972), who states that “sense” is a power factor used to oppress the “senseless,” as well as using sense to create truth, which justifies acts of distinction and segregation. In this example, the problem is the girl who has difficulty balancing between being private and personal and not the peers who insult her. Another example is when the tough guy Joseph talks about Bill, he emphasizes the signs of being different in Bill—he is weak and needs care, in contrast to Joseph, who is strong and cool. They are not solely two boys in the same class; instead Joseph implicitly emphasizes a hegemonic explanation of masculinity that regulates the power order online (and in the classroom, too). From Foucault’s (1972) point of view, there is a need to understand how truth becomes “the truth” and not to discover the truth. When Elin, Johanna, and Joseph argue, they construct the truth, which is taken for granted in their argumentation.

The result shows that the gender system is constituted by skills, behavior, appearance, and language that are attached to the youths as boys or girls. Hirdman (2003) means that the gender contract is based on hierarchies and separation, which also appears in their statements. Both boys and girls argue that there are differences between the genders, which they have to be aware of in their online interactions. Sebastian says for example that “girls want more self-confidence . . . boys have it!.” Hierarchies between boys and girls appear when they comment on boys and girls published photos, though it is easier for girls to get access to the boys’ acting space than vice versa. But boys or girls perform differently within the gender category. Some intertwining between gender, sexuality, and status are loaded with power to challenge prevailing order and some are not. The same kind of act can be regarded as either accepted or norm-breaching depending upon who the sender is. It can also be verbalized as a construction of inequality, including social relationships based on interactions in the social world as well as collective processes that they are a part of. This interplay also sheds light on that intersectionality has to be understood as bounded by both structure and context. There is an ongoing and permanent negotiation between the boys and girls as agents (with their own experiences) and the surrounding conditions. Both processes affect the construction of a social identity and by extension also the possibility of belonging.
This study contributes with perspectives by highlighting how boys and girls are negotiating their social identity depending on what is regarded as normality in the specific context. By their acts the youths construct frames for being an appropriate boy/girl and at the same time they perform their social identity. Online they write themselves to a “being” (Sundén, 2003), and by photos and comments they are testing what it is like to be a young person. To conclude, the processes of belonging are complex, dynamic, and power-loaded phenomena. The social control online is effective and there are lots of aspects to handle to be an appropriate and accepted young person. The result shows that there is a risk in talking about young people and their online interactions as if they are one homogeneous group with equal possibilities to interact online. Instead, there is an ongoing and constant negotiation with many parallel processes, affecting the development of a social identity, the position in the peer group, and how to be a boy or a girl.

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