KU LEUVEN

LAB VOOR MEDIAPSYCHOLOGIE
COMMUNICATIEWETENSCHAP
KU LEUVEN

project mimic
Grant agreement n°852317

erc
European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Growing up in a Digital World: Mimicking Media Models
Insights from the MIMIc project

Prof. Dr. Laura Vandenbosch – Director Media Psychology Lab

Media Psychology Lab

MEDIA
PSYCHOLOGY LAB
COMMUNICATION SCIENCE
KU LEUVEN








European Research Council

KU LEUVEN

Media effects, youth and:

Research Foundation Flanders
Opening new horizons

Vocational aspirations

Mental well-being

Body image & Sexuality

Political socialization

Digital well-being

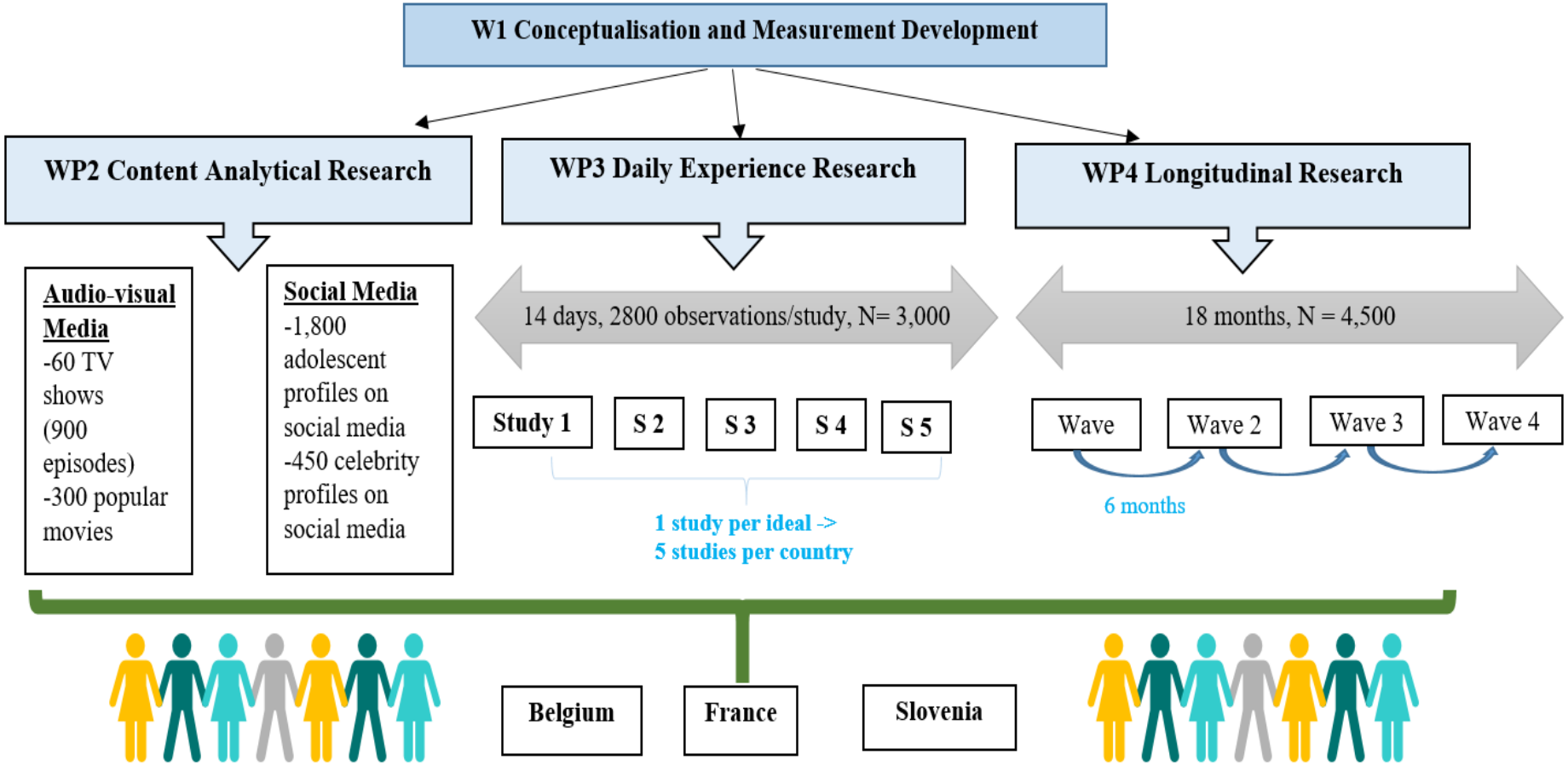
J Haidt

There is now a great deal of evidence that social media is a substantial cause, not just a tiny correlate, of depression and anxiety, and therefore of behaviors related to depression and anxiety, including self-harm and suicide,", *After Babel*

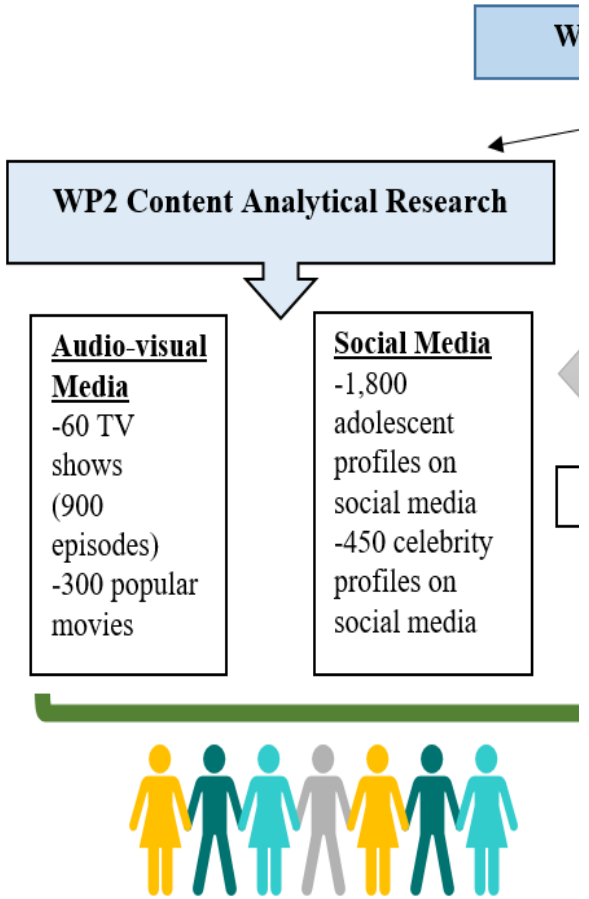
MiMIc Project

project mimic
Grant agreement n°852317

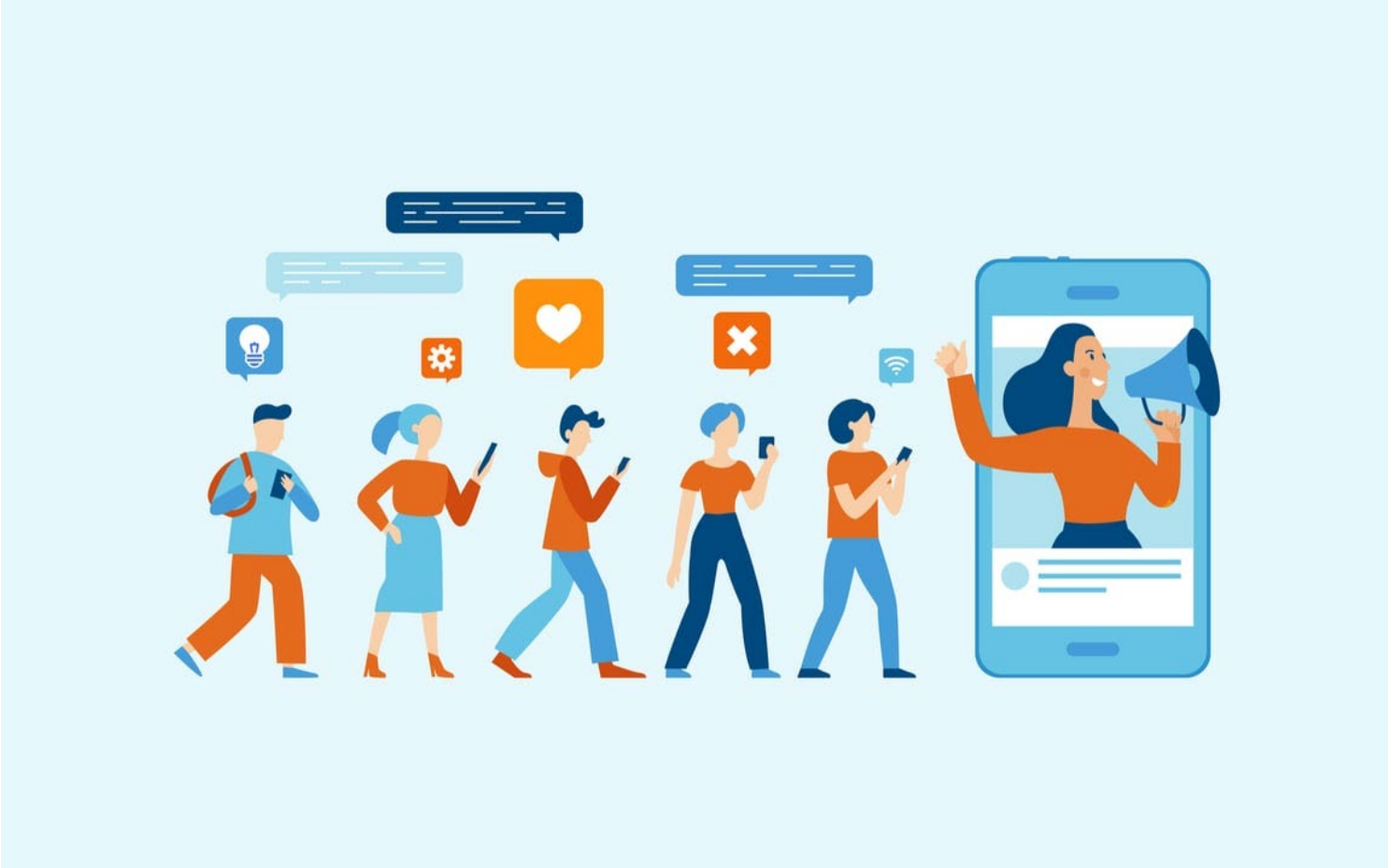
European Research Council
Established by the European Commission



“Social media abound with ideals”



INFLUENCERS



Method: Study 1

PART 1

- Inductive framing analysis
- Random subsample of 30% of the posts (*N* = 360)

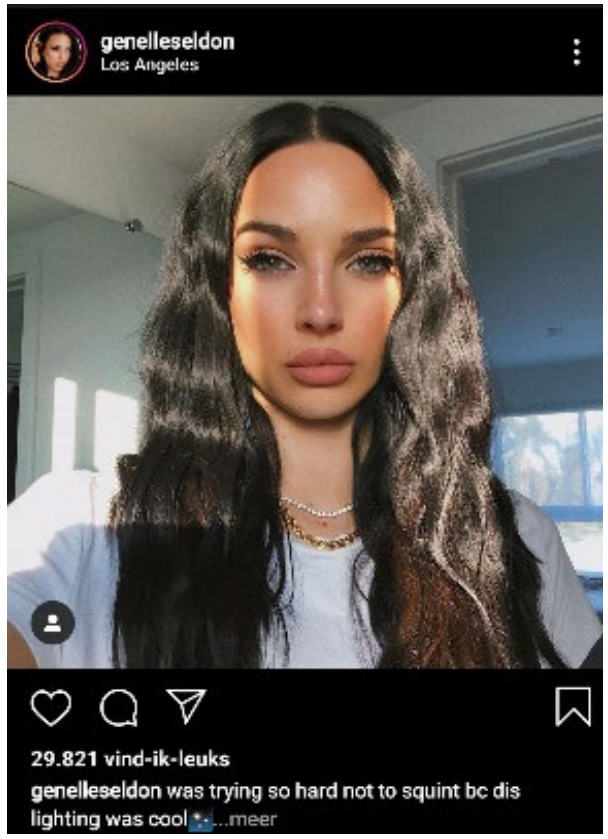
PART 2

- 60 female Instagram influencer profiles (M_{age} = 26.02, *SD* = 2.73) across three cultures (i.e. 20 Flemish, 20 American and 20 Chinese)
- 20 most recent posts of each profile were selected for analysis (*N*= 1,200 Instagram posts)
- Only the first picture or video of a post was examined.

Frames

Look at me

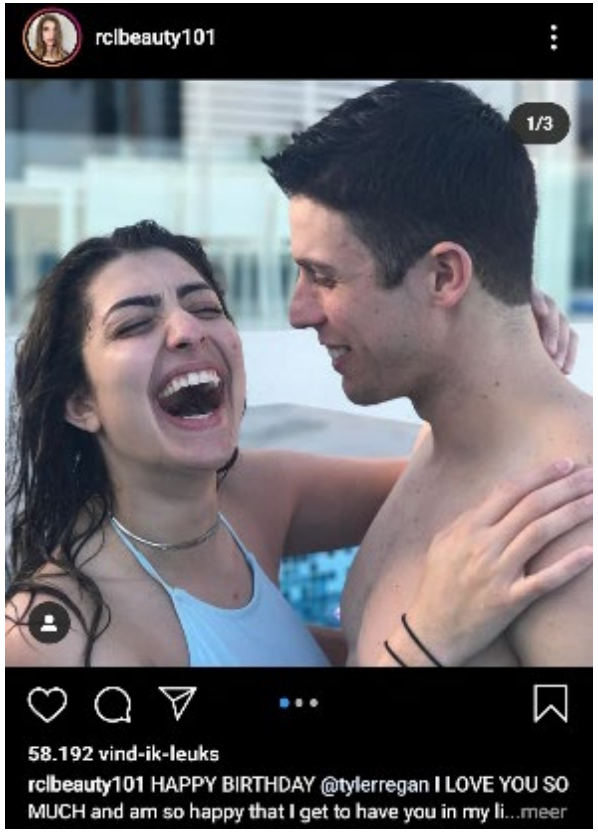
- Mostly focused on appearance
- Values: self-indulgence
- E.g. selfie
- 33%



Frames

You and me

- Mostly focused on others
- Values: connectedness & security
- E.g. Picture with boyfriend
- 11.6%



Frames

I’m a busy bee

- Mostly focused on meaningful activities
- Values: excitement & pleasure
- E.g. Travel picture
- 27.8%

Frames

Look at what I did

- Mostly focused on own achievements
- Values: achievement & ambition
- E.g. Before & after picture
- 2.9%

Frames

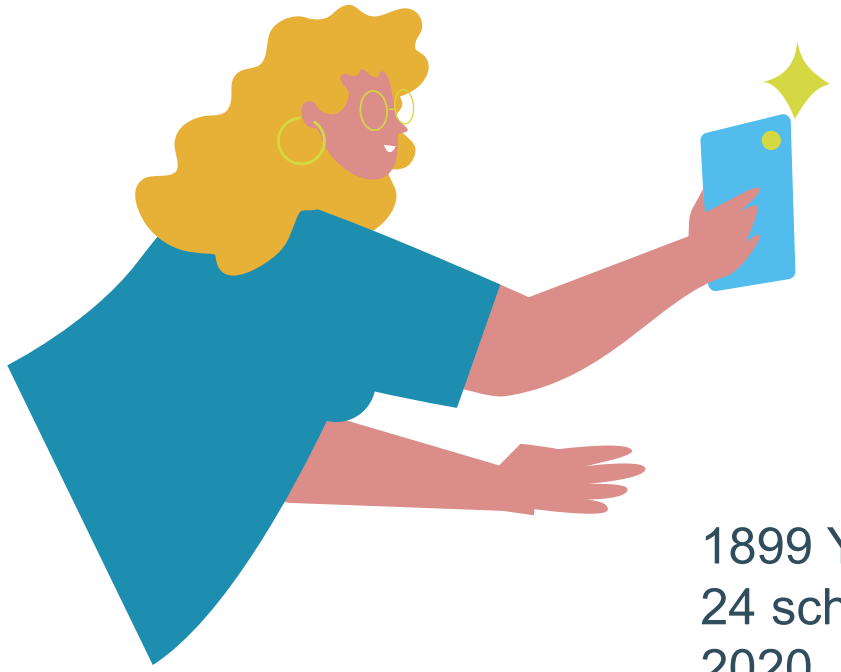
I’m an expert

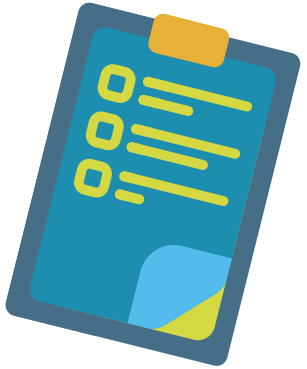
- Mostly focused on knowledge
- Values: competence & expertise
- E.g. workouts
- 18.1%

Patterns

- **Most used** — Look at me, I'm a busy bee & I'm an expert
- **Most popular** — Look at me, You and me & Look at what I did
- **Most sexualized** — Look at me
- **Cultural differences** — **I'm a busy bee**: Flemish & Chinese use it more than American (Flemish also receive more likes)
  Look at what I did: American (& Flemish) use it more than Chinese

PEERS



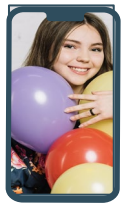


Positivity bias survey

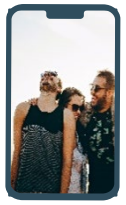
1899 Youth
24 schools
2020

MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY LAB
COMMUNICATION SCIENCE
KU LEUVEN

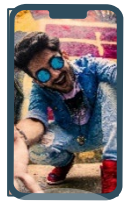
Pictures that youth REGULARLY share in which they….



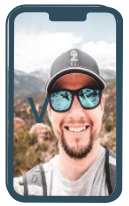
69% Look pretty



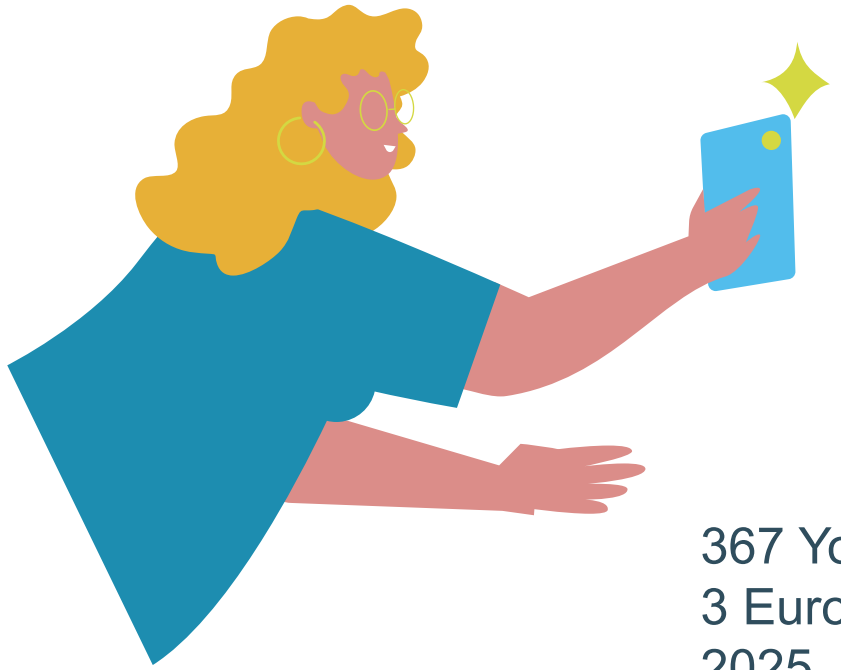
87% Seem to have a lot of fun



87% Are happy

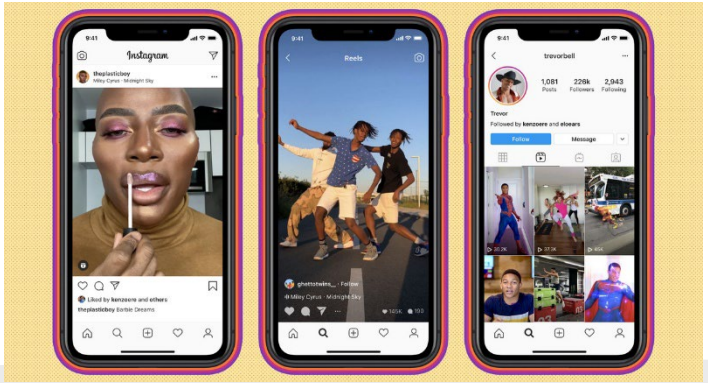


77% Are on an adventurous tip



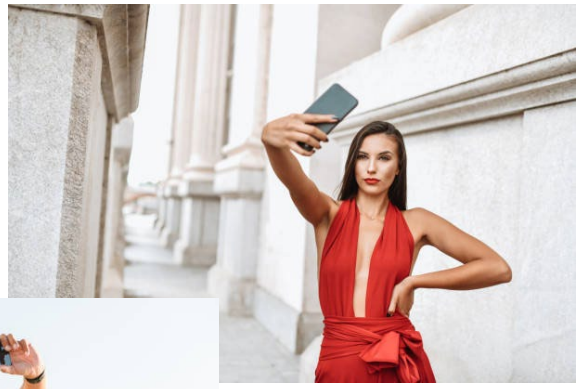
Data donation study

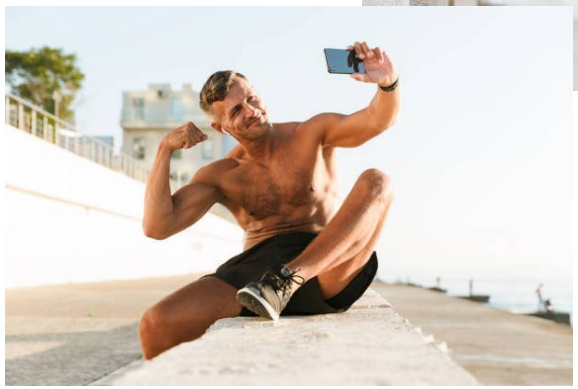
367 Youth
3 European countries
2025



MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY LAB
COMMUNICATION SCIENCE
KU LEUVEN

Method





Sample

- 367 participants
  - 31.30% Belgium, 36.50% France, 32.30% Slovenia
  - 62.10% girls, 74.80% heterosexual, 80.70% European ethnic background
  - M_{age} = 16.31 y/o (*SD* = 1.65)

Data Donation

- TikTok: $n_{profiles}$ = 191, n_{posts} = 142
- Instagram: $n_{profiles}$ = 253, n_{posts} = 328, $n_{stories}$ = 212
- Snapchat: n_{posts} = 395, $n_{stories}$ = 91

Content Analysis (Konings et al., 2024)

- Sexualized face (1 = present0 = absent; α = 0.71)
- Sexualized body pose (1 = present, 0 = absent; α = 0.75)
- Sexualized clothing (1 = present, 0 = absent; α = 0.81)
- Sexualized editing practices (1 = present, 0 = absent; α = 0.76)

Linkage Analysis

- , Sociodemographic variables (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation)
- Body Image variables
  - Body Satisfaction (BDS; Stice & Whitenton, 2002; 1 = *very unsatisfied,* 5 = *very satisfied; M = 3.13, SD* = 0.91)
  - Internalization of Appearance Ideals (SATAQ-4; Schaefer et al., 2015; 1 = *strongly disagree,* 5 = *strongly agree, M* = 3.67, *SD* = 0.87)
  - Self-sexualization (ESS; Liss et al., 2011, 1 = *strongly disagree,* 5 = *strongly agree, M* = 3.17, *SD* = 0.97)
- Perceived number of comments *(M* = 2.89)/ likes (*M* = 3.01) ("Please rate the relative number of comments/likes received on each donated post/story compared to usual number of comments/likes" 1 = *much lower*, 5 = *much higher)*

project mimic erc 852317
MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY LAB COMMUNICATION SCIENCE KU LEUVEN
KU LEUVEN

Results

- Subtle sexualization seems **widespread**
  - 4 in 10 adolescents had recently posted sexualized visual content, most often via facial expressions
  - Sexualized face (23.98%) > body pose (15.26%) > clothing (14.17%) > editing practices (5.18%)
- Gender norms seem to persist
  - Girls posted 3x more sexualized content than boys → reflection of **broader societal expectations**?
- Platform features matter, but less than expected
  - No significant differences in sexualization appeared across platforms or content type → **consistent digital identity**
  - **(e.g.,** (28.71%) > (26.23%) > (21.47%))
- No links with country/body image
  - Homogenization of youth culture through social media's global influence?
  - Sexualized self-presentation as experimental behavior rather than reflection of negative BI
- Sexualized content ≠ social reward

“(Social) media abound with (appearance) ideals”

“0,5% of models were plus size”
Sample size = 1111 fashion ads; 2010-2020

Vranken et al., 2025

KU LEUVEN

Effects?

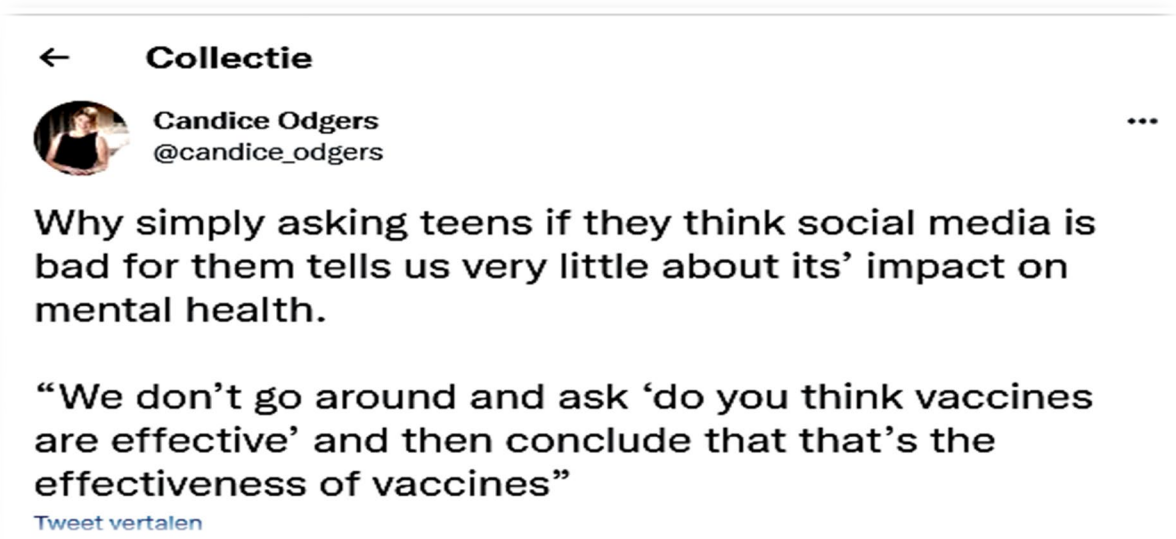
Interviews with adolescents (Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2018-19)

- Boy, 17: *"[on social media] you need to **look good**. You need to do self-promotion and show that you are **a nice person** or a handsome person."* – May 2018
- Girl, 18: *"Some people pretend to be better, **more beautiful** and different [on social media]"* – May 2018
- Boy, 12: *"I used to believe about everything that is presented in a **perfect** way on social media, more specifically on Instagram, that those people truly have perfect lives"* – February 2019

Interviews with adolescents (Maes, Fardouly & Vandenbosch, 2025)

- Prevalence and dominance online -> algorithms
- "*Kylie Jenner or someone, they have the perfect life, the perfect body... and that's something like, oh, I would also like to have that.*" (Emily, 17, female, high internalization).
- "*And also, for men, it's the same, you now have a lot of fitness influencers... who say they don't take steroids... people start to think, 'Oh, I can achieve that too,' while it's not achievable without steroids. I find that very negative... That can have a very negative effect on people watching, because they think, 'I'm going to work on that, I want to achieve that too. That's impossible.*"(Ethan, 17, male, high internalization).
- "*I would probably take a new photo even faster to make sure everyone looks good in it, instead of posting a photo in which one of my friends or someone else doesn't look good, but I do….I just find it very important that everyone feels comfortable with it. Especially if you want to post something.*" (Jack, 18, boy, high internalization)

Effects?


Collectie
Candice Odgers
@candice_odgers
Why simply asking teens if they think social media is bad for them tells us very little about its' impact on mental health.
"We don't go around and ask 'do you think vaccines are effective' and then conclude that that's the effectiveness of vaccines"
Tweet vertalen

Different studies, different conclusions

Publications

Search... | Type | Date

Anaëlle Gonzalez, Isra Irmak Akgün, Laura Vandenbosch (2025). The Values of Fame: Exploring the Visual and Textual Representations of Basic Values in Influencers' Instagram Content.. Social Media + Society.
DOI

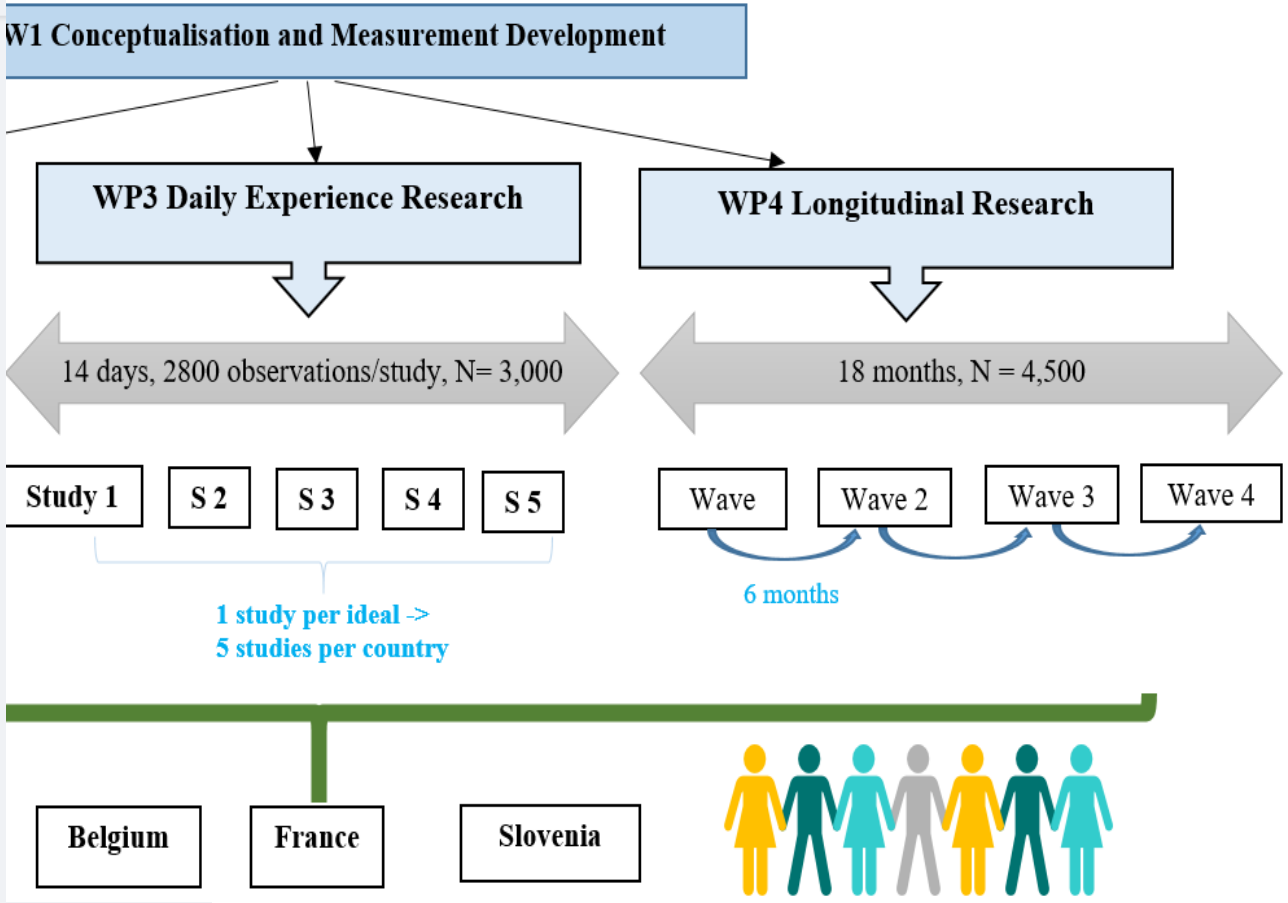
Gaëlle Vanhoffelen, Anaëlle Gonzalez, Lara Schreurs, Caroline Giraudeau, Laura Vandenbosch (2025). The Perfect Li(f)e: A Longitudinal Study on Positive Social Media Content and European Adolescents' Perfectionism.. Communication Research.
DOI

Femke Konings, Laura Vandenbosch, Kaitlin Fitzgerald, Jasmine Fardouly, Elien Beleen, Toon Tabruyn, Kathrin Karsay, Chelly Maes (2025). Adolescents' sexualized self-presentations on social media: A cross-national data donation study. Media Psychology.

Jasmina Rosič, Lara Schreurs, Laura Vandenbosch (2025). Adolescents' perceptions regarding their smartphone use: Longitudinal relationships between perceived digital well-being and self-esteem.. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.
DOI

Laura Vandenbosch, Kathleen Beullens, Robyn Vanherle, Lara Schreurs (2025). Digital media uses and effects: The contributing roles of time. Journal of Children and Media.
DOI

Katie Fitzgerald, Laura Vandenbosch, Toon Tabruyn (2024). Adolescent Emotional Expression



KU LEUVEN

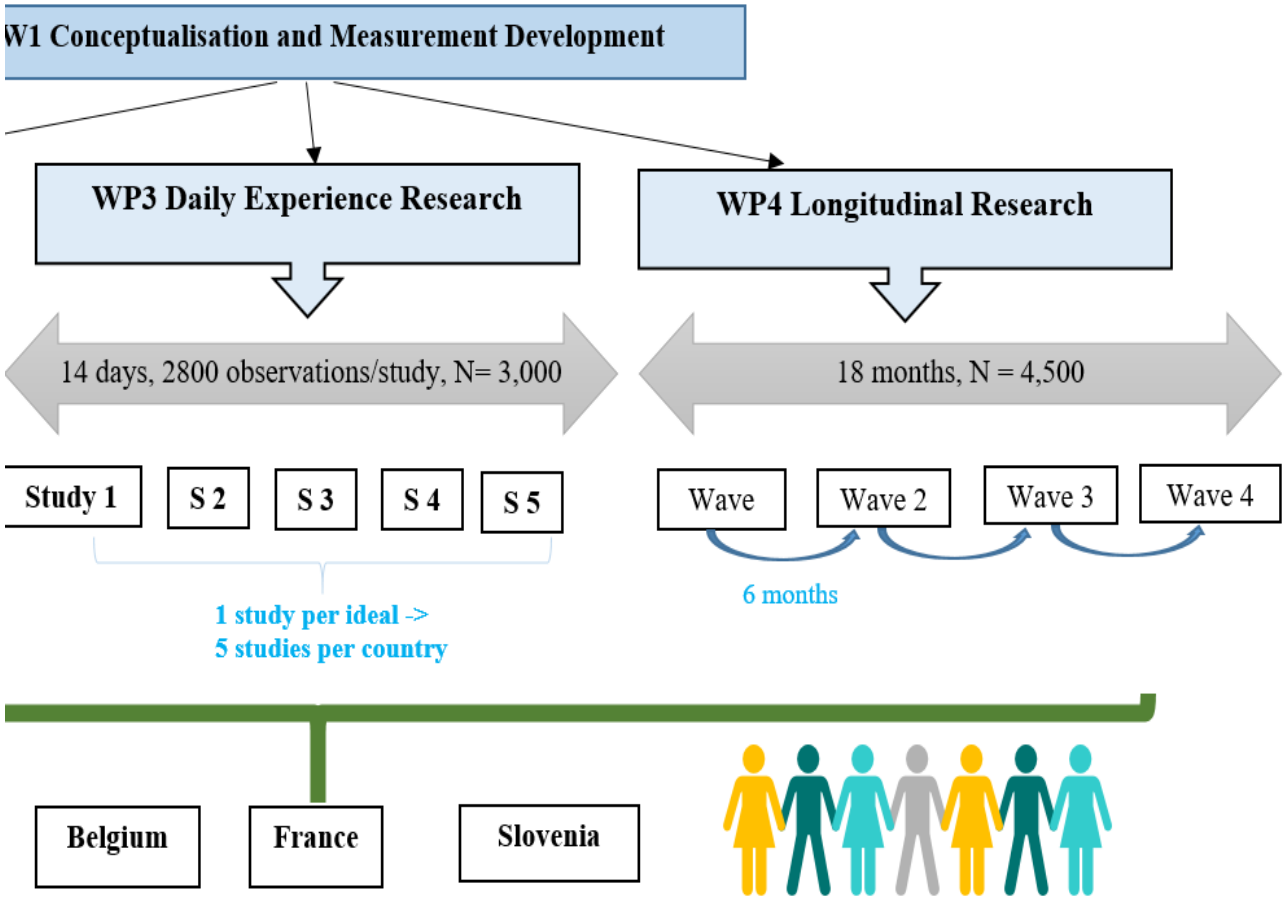
Different studies, different conclusions

Insights across research

Insight 1: **Short term effects** emerge across groups, yet *different groups* do different activities

Insight 2: Media selection and effect dynamics exists yet differ between groups across **longer time periods**

Insight 3: Effects are both **positive** and **negative**….
Yet some groups are *not* in balance



Insight 1: Short term effects emerge across groups, yet different groups do different activities

Who is using social media: Example gender (Maes, Van Herle Fardouly, &Vandenbosch, 2025).

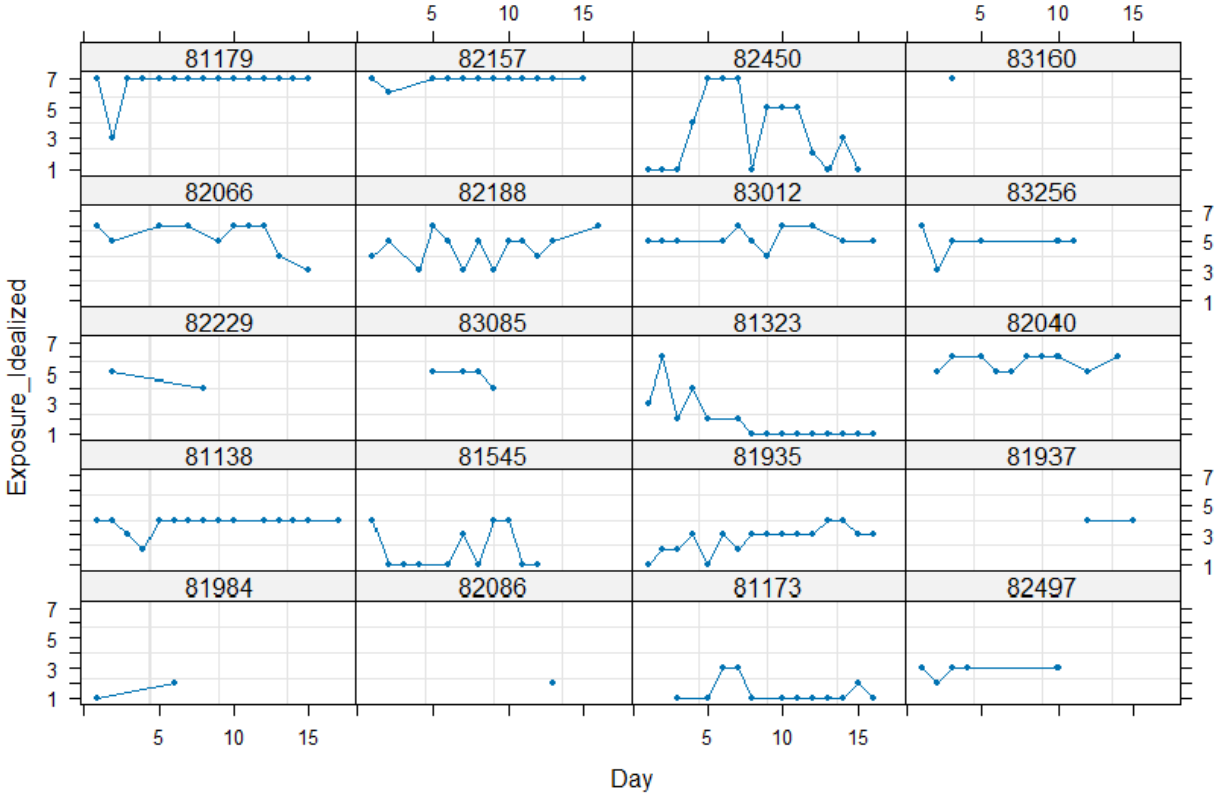
Between

Between-person association with **body surveillance** (*B* = .81, *p* < .001)

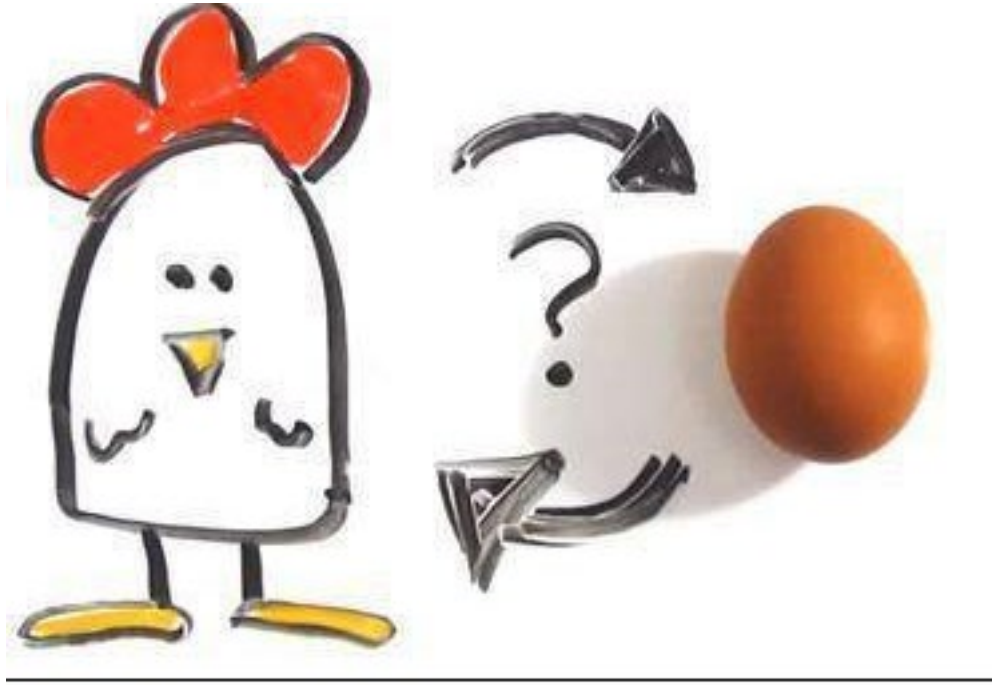
Gender

Significant interaction term at between-person level for outcome body satisfaction (B = -.66, p < .027)

→ association **only present among girls**

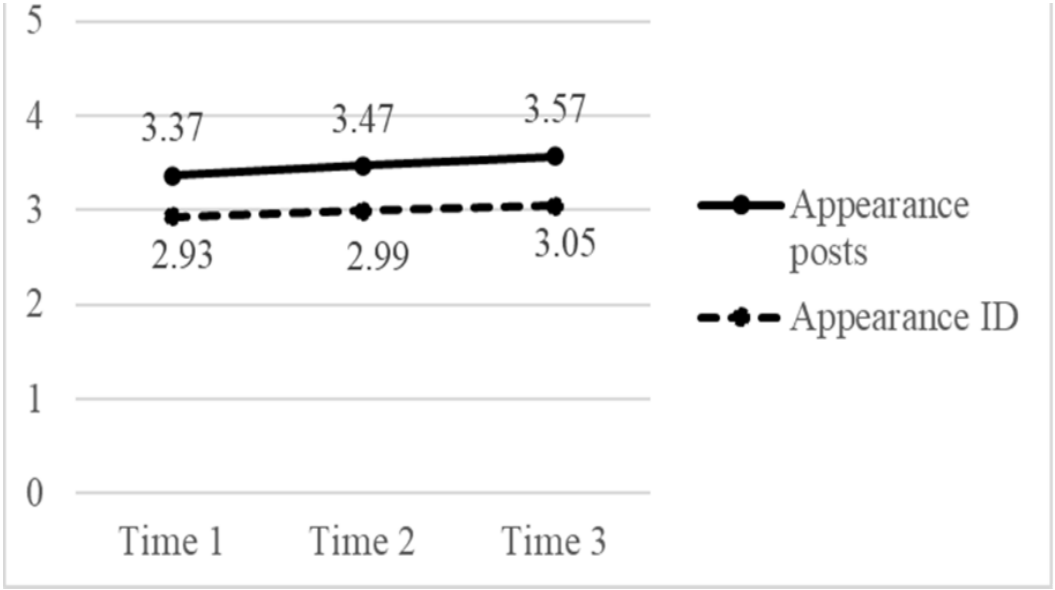


Insight 2: Media selection and effect dynamics exists yet differ between groups across longer time periods



“Dynamic media effects paradigma” (Vanhoffelen, Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2025)

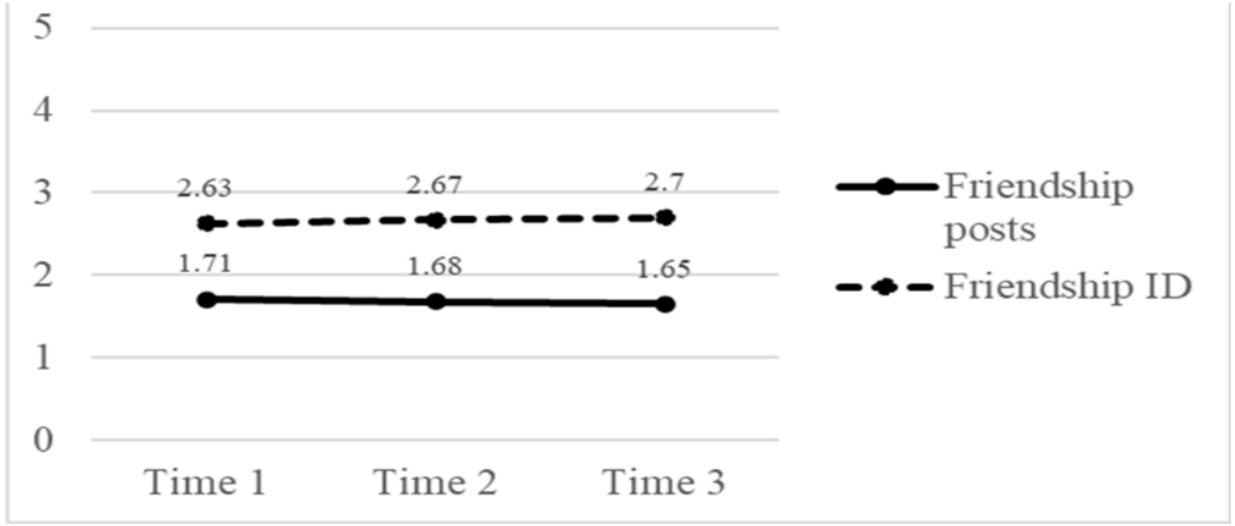
Exposure to appearance focused posts dynamically grows with youth’s insecurity about their appearance over time within a subgroup of youth (55%)



Insight 3: Effects are both positive and negative…. Yet some groups are *not* in balance

“Dynamic media effects paradigma” (Vanhoffelen, Schreurs & Vandenbosch, 2025)

Exposure to positive friendship posts dynamically grows with youth’s positive feelings of their friendships over time within a subgroup of youth (61%)



“Trajectories of Digital Flourishing”: Not everyone experiences the positive effects

FIGURE 2 Average co-trajectory of digital flourishing dimensions by latent class, means by class. ASP, authentic self-presentation; CO, connectedness; CP, civil participation; PSC, positive social comparison; SC, self-control.

Solution?

Top Down?

OR

Bottom Up?

KU LEUVEN

LAB VOOR MEDIAPSYCHOLOGIE
COMMUNICATIEWETENSCHAP
KU LEUVEN

project mimic
Grant agreement n°852317

erc
European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Questions? Thank you!

laura.vandenbosch@kuleuven.be

Follow us on LinkedIn for updates : Media Psychology Lab

Interested to read more?

project mimic

Grant agreement n°852317

European Research Council

Established by the European Commission

Dedecker, L., Schreurs, L., Vandenbosch, L., Pellemans, E., Van Hul, L., Maes, C. (2025). Visible difference: A multi-method study investigating content of and responses to influencers with visible differences. Body Image, 54, Art.No. 101921. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2025.101921

Kvardova, N., Machackova, H., Maes, C., Vandenbosch, L. with Kvardova, N. (corresp. author) (2025). Navigating Beauty Standards on Social Media: Impact of Appearance Activity on Adolescents' Body Dissatisfaction. JOURNAL OF YOUTH AND ADOLESCENCE, 54 (8), 1999-2018. doi: 10.1007/s10964-025-02159-y Access via repository

Maes, C., Fardouly, J., Vandenbosch, L. with Vandenbosch, L. (joint last author) (2025). A Qualitative Exploration of Belgian Adolescents' and Young Adults' Views on Idealized and Body Positive Content on Social Media. Body Image, 54, Art.No. 101938. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2025.101938

Maes, C., Vanherle, R., Fardouly, J., Vandenbosch, L. (2025). #BoPo, #Ideal, or #Mixed? Exploring Adolescents' Daily Exposure to Appearance Content on Social Media and Its Relations with Body Image Components. Communication Research. doi: 10.1177/0093650225133890 Access via repository

Maes, C., Vanherle, R., Fardouly, J., Vandenbosch, L. with Maes, C. (corresp. author) (2025). #BoPo, #Ideal, or #Mixed? Exploring Adolescents' Daily Exposure to Appearance Content on Social Media and Its Relations with Body Image Components. COMMUNICATION RESEARCH. doi: 10.1177/00936502251338901 Access via repository

Vanhoffelen, G., Gonzalez, A., Schreurs, L., Giraudeau, C., Vandenbosch, L. (2025). The Perfect Li(f)e: a Longitudinal Study on Positive Social Media Content and European Adolescents' Perfectionism. Communication Research. doi: 10.1177/00936502251337650

Maes, C., Kvardova, N., Vandenbosch, L. with Maes, C. (joint first author), Kvardova, N. (joint first author) (2025). BoPo Online, BoPo Offline? Engagement with Body Positivity Posts, Positive Appearance Comments on Social Media, and Adolescents' Appearance-Related Prosocial Tendencies. Computers In Human Behavior, (162). doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2024.108471 Access via repository

Konings, F., Sumter, S., Vandenbosch, L. (2024). A Linkage Study Investigating Sexualized Self-presentation on Mobile Dating Apps and User Traits. Body Image, 51, Art.No. 101781. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101781 Access via repository

Konings, F., Vranken, I., Cingel, D., Vandenbosch, L., de Lenne, O. with Konings, F. (joint first author) (2024). Are Diverse Models Really Non-idealized? Investigating Body Positivity Public Feed Posts of Fashion and Beauty Brands on Instagram. Body Image, 50, Art.No. 101728. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101728 Access via repository

de Lenne, O., Vandenbosch, L., Smits, T., Eggermont, S. with de Lenne, O. (joint first author), Eggermont, S. (joint last author) (2023). Experimental research on non-idealized models: A systematic literature review. Body Image. doi: 10.1016/j.bodyim.2023.101640 Access via repository

Gonzalez, A., Vandenbosch, L., Rousseau, A. with Gonzalez, A. (joint first author), Rousseau, A. (joint last author), Gonzalez, A. (corresp. author) (2023). A Panel Study of the Relationships Between Social Media Interactions and Adolescents' Pro-Environmental Cognitions and

de Lenne, O., Mahon, C., Eggermont, S., Smits, T., Hevey, D., Vandenbosch, L. with Vandenbosch, L. (corresp. author) (2023). Intercultural insights on the impact of different non-idealized models on men's body image and advertising perceptions. JOURNAL OF HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY, 28 (10), 913-928. doi: 10.1177/13591053231152012 Access via repository

van Oosten, J.M F., Vandenbosch, L., Peter, J. with van Oosten, J.M F. (corresp. author) (2023). Predicting the use of visually oriented social media: The role of psychological well-being, body image concerns and sought appearance gratifications. Computers In Human Behavior, 144, Art.No. ARTN 107730. doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2023.107730 Access via repository

….. SEE OUR WEBSITE!

KU LEUVEN