



Living in the Mirror:  
Girls' Privacy and Equality  
on Social Media

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Social media amplify gender stereotypes in three inter-related ways

1. Commercial surveillance intensifies girls interactions with stereotypes

2. Family/peer surveillance creates a gendered burden to manage others' expectations

3. Hyper-visibility on social media alienate girls' bodies, making them objects to be judged by others

34 girls & young women

“love-hate”



the photo

“There’ s usually nothing ... bad [Laughter] ... I’ d be like, oh, make sure I’ m appropriate when I’ m speaking, but I’ m usually, like, I’ m not bad ... like cleaner, type of thing. ... no, my pictures are usually good ... it’ s usually just like a face shot of like me and people or um, like nature or like the weather or like my family so like it’ s never anything that bad” (UM1)

“inappropriate”, “crazy”, “rough or greasy”, “trashy”, “sleazy” or “scandalous”

FGUM5: “the classic, like, girl, like, pictures at your webcam and you’ re bending over like this just to see, you can see right down your shirt...”

FGUM2: “girls are like squishing their boobs together or something [group laugh]. And like bending over and they ‘re like, I don’ t know, trying to turn sideways or whatever ‘cause it looks bigger this way [group laugh]. Yeah.”

FGUM5: “Or like taking a picture and people being like, oh, like, I like your hair, and they’ ll take it from behind but in reality you know they’ re doing it so you can see their butt”

“boobs”, “cleavage”, “without a lot of clothes”, “way too revealing”, “sexual pictures”, “posing in suggestive ways”





“... girls, we have to, like, um, cover ourselves more than guys, so, like, I find that, like, um, if you were to look at a picture of a girl, like, um, with just like, uh, like a crop top or something and then a guy with no top, I don't know, they're kind of similar but the way you would look at it would be different ... people will talk” (UM1)

“sluts”, “whores”, “trash”

FGUM6: “There’s a difference between like flaunting it and like actually just ...” FGUM3: “Being yourself.” FGUM6: “Having it there because you have boobs [group laugh], like we all have boobs, but yeah. But there’s a difference between wanting to show them to the whole world and you can still be respectful to yourself you know”

FGUM5: “You can like totally tell when someone’s doing it on purpose or it just so happens to be the picture [others agree]. Yeah, like, you can tell by like the angle like they’re taking the picture, if you’re constantly taking all your profile pictures from up here so you can see down your shirt, like, you can tell, like, you know which girl’s like doing it on purpose and which girls aren’t”

“insecure”, “self-absorbed”, “annoying”,  
“conceited”, “bragging”, “desperate,”  
“attention whores”

“good photos”

“pretty and just a little bit sexy,  
I guess. That’s it” (FGUA6)

“Well, some people are fine, just put whatever on there. And it’s like if you don’t like it, don’t look at it. But other people are very conscious of their, like worry that they’ll get crap or something” (RM1)



“getting crap” you’ re fat

“ ‘I understand why you’ re so self-conscious about your weight. If I looked like you, I would be too’ . That’ s horrible”

“getting crap” no makeup

“Like, if a girl puts a picture up without makeup on or something, people could attack her, like, that even people she doesn’ t know could see it”

“getting crap” no makeup

“Some people would call her ugly or something if you don’ t wear makeup. Or they’ ll just attack her for that ... They could attack their appearance, or the way you act or relationships with guys, being with guys. ... Like, they could say the way you look in general or like clothes you wear or lack of clothes you wear”

“getting crap” saying what you think

“just bashed [by a boy on social media] ... about how she looks. What she was wearing. She had a very authentic look, and she was never really scared to say what she wants or act in any way that she wants. But, oh, man, I think it was mostly about her looks, maybe what she normally wears. ... Anyway, it was just bizarre”

“getting crap” too much information

“I used to have this girl on Facebook, and she’d just write everything. “Off to the mall, then going for a nap,” “Just woke up from the nap, off to the bathroom,” just totally personal. And I knew I wasn’t the only one who thought this. I had to delete her; it was just, like, so annoying”

too fat, too made up,  
not made up enough, expose too much  
cleavage, don't expose enough cleavage, have  
too many friends, don't have enough friends

just right

“Being made fun of, high school is brutal, I hated high school for all the cattiness and, uh, the judgment” (UA3)



“They are going to get feedback like, ‘Wow, you’re hot’. Definitely from guys. ‘Wow, you’re sexy!’ ‘Damn, what I would do if I was there, and, like, all that kind of stuff”

And from girls, you're gonna get, um...from their best friends, probably, "Oh my god, you look gorgeous! You look so skinny!"

“And you’ re gonna get from girls that don’ t like her, ‘Wow, you’ re a slut!’ You know, like, ‘You’ re nothing but a whore!’ like, ‘Put some clothes on!’ ” (RA1)

“A girl, let’s say she’s, I don’t know, with a bunch of guys in a sexual pose, or ... has tons of booze around her, or something”

“Someone will write a comment that will be, like, kind of subtle but showing that it’s inappropriate”

“and a lot of people will join in, and you can get, like, up to 75 comments and everyone’s joining in and fighting” (FGUA3)

*other* girls

empathetic



*blaming* individual girls

complex contextualized

technological architectures  
social norms  
industry marketing strategies

integrated online/offline existences

what should policymakers know?

*it's not all bad*

“there are a lot of positive aspects about it ... like I have my Grandma on Facebook and she doesn’ t live here, but ... that’ s how she saw my grad pictures because I posted it on Facebook and stuff like that, so ... I feel like policy makers, especially focus on the negative issues”

Urban Minor Focus Group  
Participant 5

“give girls a break”

Rural minor interview  
Participant 3



“If you’ re going to change the way that we’ re going to be socializing and like living day to day ... we have to cope with that in some way and it’ s going to change the way we’ re acting and it’ s going to change a lot of things so try not to be so ... like negative upon the ways that people use it because ... it’ s all changing it’ s all new so we have to learn as we go”

Rural adult interview  
Participant 3

“Three years ago ... a lot of news channels are like Facebook is bad, yeah a lot of sexual offenders are using this ... young girls, don’ t use Facebook ... and now they’ re like please come to us and like us on Facebook and then maybe you get a chance to win...you know it’ s ironic ....”

Urban minor focus group  
Participant 2

“dangers”

peer surveillance &  
gendered risk of negative judgment

permanent

*life on a powder keg*

“a big fuse if it would get public”

Urban minor interview  
Participant 3

“if you understand the internet, you know you can't go back. It's always there ... absolutely everything is out there”

Rural adult interview  
Participant 2



“there’ s danger outside there, in the social media.  
That it’ s really dangerous, and, like, if you post  
something it’ s never going to be deleted”

Rural adult interview  
Participant 2

“we like all know ... if you’ re going to send a picture of that like you know what can happen but it’ s still not fair about how bad your reputation can get effected by one bad-like one bad decision that she made doesn’ t change who she is, like posting one slutty picture doesn’ t make you a slut, it doesn’ t change who you are, like it’ s not fair how easily like your whole entire image can get changed on one image like one picture.”

Urban minor focus group  
Participant 6

“like, some people refuse to post, like, topless pictures, and they’ ll get hate for that. Or if you do post topless pictures, you’ ll get hate for that. Or if- pretty much anything you do is something wrong in someone’ s eyes.”

Rural minor focus group

Participant 4

“you know you’ re a real man when you tell me that if I don’ t send you a picture of myself like naked that you’ re going to post a picture of someone’ s breasts and put them on Facebook and tag me and say that they’ re mine”

Rural adult interview

Participant 3

“cause what would he do with that actual picture of you if you sent it and if you don’ t he’ s going to try and target you anyways to the public eye and make you look trashy”

Rural adult interview

Participant 3

“I think girls, it’s more that they pick on, like, weight and, like, looks and stuff. Guys, it’s more, like, well, “You haven’t tapped that many girls yet,” kind of thing. Like, “You’re not a man,” or “You haven’t been with, like, 20 girls yet, so you’re not a man.” And girls, it’s like, “Oh, well she’s slept with, like, 20 guys, so, you know, like, she’s dirty,” and stuff like that. So it’s different.”

Rural adult focus group

Participant 4

homophobia

sexism



“let’s take for example victim blaming Amanda Todd ... let’s look at the core issue here misogyny, sexism, exploitation and abuse of young girls, no no no! People are too busy victim blaming Amanda Todd ... “well, she shouldn’t have sent those pictures, what was she thinking, like, this girl’s a slut!” and it reinforces that, and so, those ideologies contribute to rape victims being – “well, what were you doing walking alone at 12 o’ clock anyways?””

Urban adult interview  
Participant 1

“only towards the girl and no one assumes that the guy has anything to do with it ... no one said anything to him, just her.”

Rural minor interview  
Participant 2

*online architecture can incent  
disclosure & exposure*

“Yeah, lots of people would just accept people and just so they have another friend. ... Like the more friends you have, the more popular, kind of thing.”

Rural minor interview

Participant 1

requiring unnecessary information

“that’s what I don’t like about the internet it kinda forces you to put all the dates in and I don’t like to do that it bothers me cause where is-why do they need to know this?”

Rural minor interview  
Participant 3

complicated user agreements

*no idea*



“Yeah, ‘cause you can, like, add an app or something ... and sometimes it does it at first, or a month down the road it will ask if it can access your friends or your information, and you don’ t really know what it wants to really access now. And you press cancel and you can’ t use it, and you’ re like, “F\*\*\*.” So I have to accept it.”

Urban adult focus group  
Participant 4

shifting privacy defaults  
complex privacy settings

“I think I do. I’ m not 100% sure but I think I have, it’ s like only my friends can see my stuff, I think that’ s the setting that way.”

Rural minor interview  
Participant 1

default uploading

“every time I take a picture on my phone, it automatically uploads to my Google account. Automatically. It doesn’ t matter how many times I try to delete it, because I can’ t even delete it off my phone. ... ‘Cause when [you first get this kind of phone], you have to get a Google account. So now everything gets uploaded to my Google account.”

Rural adult focus group  
Participant 1

automatic integration of  
content across platforms

“everyone knows what you’ re up to”

Adult urban focus group  
Participant 6

*architecture intersects with social  
norms and media stereotypes*



*“You feel like you need to be perfect, or live up to everyone’s expectations of you. And the media’s expectations of what girls are supposed to be like.”*

Rural minor interview

Participant 2

“you see other girls’ profiles and they’ re like portrayed as like super pretty and all that, and you try to be like that. I guess, girls feel pressured to be like that”

Rural minor interview

Participant 2

“if they’ re getting a lot of guy followers they’ ll feel pressures to like cater their pictures or the style of their picture more towards the guy followers, cause they’ re getting a lot of them, and ... they don’ t necessarily post the pictures because they ... don’ t want to be respected by people but they want attention I guess. And they want like they want to gain a following so they feel more powerful, so that’ s why they do it.”

Urban minor interview  
Participant 2

*certain platforms invite conflict*

Ask.fm

“a big one [for “cyberbullying”] ... it’s  
like asking people ‘come bully me  
please’ ”

Rural minor focus group

Participant 4

what should policymakers do?

empathetic  
proactive  
systemic



eConsumers  
eCommodities

eCitizens

*surveillance is a problem not a solution*

platform providers

“if you wanted something deleted, that it should be completely gone. Like, it should not be traceable ever again. ... I’ d feel better if I knew that when I deleted an account ... everything’ s gone, instead of them having my information.”

Rural adult focus group

Participant 4

“[if] they’ re selling your information, like your pictures, that’ s putting you at risk, *that* is a violation of privacy. ... because if a girls’ father ... [sees] their daughter on this advertisement on a porno site, I think it is more –you can have a lot more negative backlash than if ... a father sees his son on the advertisement of a porno site ... just because of social constructions of male and female sexuality she’ d be faced [with] harsher consequences socially.”

Urban adult interview

Participant 1

*make it easier to take down  
“cyberbullying”*

*provide more support for targets*



*address underlying problems  
not just symptoms*

“[I]f I was talking to a policy maker then I would say “you want to eradicate the issue, or you wanna help limit the online bullying, and the sexual harassment of girls online ... and even just the idea of girls sending out these pictures of them with bikinis, or bras, or lingerie, and ... that coming back to haunt them for the rest of their lives? You want to eradicate that, you have to implement women’s studies and both men and women need to take these courses.... That’s the kind of activities that are going to challenge ... sexism and oppression of women.”

Urban adult interview  
Participant 1

“deconstructing and unlearning ... the ideologies that if a woman gets raped then she should take self-defense or she shouldn't have done this, or what she should've done differently as opposed to tackling the core issue: no, there's a guy that's a rapist. We gotta teach people not to rape, not how not to get raped.”

Urban adult interview

Participant 1

“we’ re supposed to be allies ... we’ re not supposed to be fighting each other, we’ re supposed to be working together. We’ re supposed to keep an eye out on these issues for each other.”

Urban adult interview  
Participant 1

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The eQUALITY PROJECT

[www.equalityproject.ca](http://www.equalityproject.ca)