SUMMARY REPORT

Social media and masculinity norms among adolescents: insights from Mexico

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Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar, A.C.

Acknowledgments

About Mexfam

The Mexican Foundation for Family Planning (Mexfam) is a Mexican civil society organization that has been working for 59 years to improve the quality of life of the population through health services and comprehensive sexuality education. Mexfam defends sexual and reproductive rights and works to prevent gender-based violence. Since 1986, Mexfam's Gente Joven program has offered educational services to young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in rural, urban and semi-urban areas of several Mexican states through innovative, evidence-based interventions.

About the authors

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Introduction

Adolescents and young people in many countries have grown up with social media and often spend hours each day in 'virtual' communities. With social media playing an immense role during youth and adolescence, educators, families, researchers and those working on gender equality around the world are increasingly alarmed about the sexist content that is circulating online and how this may shape perceptions of gender roles and equality among younger generations. While a growing body of evidence points to the impacts of such content on women and girls, researchers are only just beginning to assess the effects of social media use on gender and masculinity norms among adolescent boys and young men. A review by ODI shows that the limited studies available in this area tend to focus on relatively homogeneous populations in the Global North, which cannot necessarily be generalised to other contexts and countries (Koester and Marcus, 2023). Responses need to be informed by more qualitative research that listens to the voices of adolescent boys and that learns about their lived experiences of their interconnected online and offline worlds, the content they are accessing, how they interpret it and how they feel it influences their attitudes and behaviour.

To address this gap, Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar A.C. (Mexfam), a Mexican civil society organization, with support from ODI/ALIGN, conducted participatory mixed-methods research to understand how social media content influences gender and masculinity norms among adolescent boys in different parts of Mexico. The research asked the following questions.

1. How does the use of social media by adolescent boys relate to gender norms and particularly to ideals for male behaviour ('masculinity' norms)?

2. How are gender norms shaped by the use of social media and vice versa?

3. What is the role of 'offline' gender norms in this context?

This English summary presents the methodology and findings detailed in the full Spanish-language research report.

The research results show how the ideals for male behaviour that boys learn in offline environments during their childhood and early adolescence influence their experiences online, as well as their identity. The study finds that influencers and other social media content often reinforce traditional masculinity norms – including ideals of strength, economic independence and emotional detachment – in ways that affect the self-image, interactions and experiences of adolescents, both online and offline. The gender stereotypes that circulate on social media can lead adolescent boys to feel intense pressure and a sense of conflict between their experienced and desired identity. At the same time, the research shows that the use of the Internet and social media can impact young people in different ways, with some adolescent boys developing more critical attitudes towards online sexist content or making use of social media to resist strict gender norms. This is, in part, because social and cultural context and socio-demographic characteristics shape online interactions and how these are perceived, resulting in diverse outcomes.

Methodology

Conducted between March and September 2024, the research drew on a mixed-methods design, including participatory qualitative research as well as an online survey. The qualitative research used Participatory Diagnosis (DiPa) and Photovoice, as well as individual interviews. These tools have proven to be effective in engaging young men in conversations about their intimate and social experiences in a meaningful way. While the qualitative research focused on learning about the experiences of boys and young men,the research teams also held several sessions with girls and young women and people of diverse gender identities to provide insights on how experiences and perspectives may differ between these different groups.

Participatory Diagnosis (DiPa) was undertaken through a total of 24 workshops with 269 adolescents (216 young men and 53 young women). These workshops consisted of three sessions:

1. **Map of my community,** an exercise that enabled teams of participants to develop and discuss a map of the physical and virtual spaces they engage with, what they do there and with whom and the relative sense of (in)security they experience in these different settings

2. **Life Line,** an activity that encouraged participants to trace when and how they have engaged with both gender norms and social media over the course of their lives

3. **Recognizing ourselves**, a session where participants discussed the ending they would give to a short story about dating and dating advice on social media.

Photovoice was also used, and was implemented through 16 workshops with 177 adolescents (154 young men and 23 young women). Each workshop consisted of four sessions: participants developed a collage on their tastes/interests and social media activities and a question related to social media and masculinity norms that they wanted to explore, before taking, describing and discussing photographs to answer this question. A total of 137 **Photovoice** participants also took part in the **DiPa workshops**. To explore emerging themes in more depth, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with 28 adolescent boys and one non-binary teenager.

Mexico is a heterogeneous country, marked by differences and inequalities between and within its federal states. In order to gather diverse experiences, the qualitative research focused on urban, semi-urban and rural settings across six states in Mexico: Hidalgo, Mexico City, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, and State of Mexico. The rural regions included in the research in Oaxaca are home to significant Indigenous populations. In contrast to existing studies that have often focused on relatively privileged populations (such as university students), the research included adolescents in and out of school and groups facing other forms of marginalisation, such as adolescents who have had experiences of addiction. Table 1 provides an overview of the qualitative research activities across the research sites.

Table 1 Numbers of research activities and participants across research sites

State	Research site	Rural/Urban	DiPa workshops	DiPa participants	Photovoice workshops	Photovoice participants	Interviews
Hidalgo	Tepeji	Urban	2	44	2	30	4
Mexico City	Villa	Urban	3	24	1	22	0
	Tlalpan	Urban	2	22	1	9	4
Michoacán	Morelia	Semi-urban	3	24	2	14	5
Oaxaca	Valles Centrales	Rural	3	32	2	17	1
	Juchitán	Rural	3	32	2	26	5
	Huajuapan	Rural	3	37	3	37	4
Quintana Roo	Benito Juárez	Urban	3	29	2	12	4
State of Mexico	Neza	Urban	2	25	1	10	2
Total			24	269	16	177	29

The qualitative research was combined with a quantitative survey to provide further insights into general patterns of social media use and attitudes towards male gender roles. The **online survey** consisted of 64 questions divided into five sections:

1. access to the Internet and social media

2. perceptions of masculinity

3. use and interaction on social media

4. access to content related to masculinity

5. socio-demographic profile.

While the qualitative research targeted specific research locations, the survey was aimed at adolescents and young people from all over Mexico and disseminated on social media, generating 283 responses (from 148 male respondents, 125 female respondents and 10 respondents from people not identifying with either of these genders). Most responses came from two states: Mexico City (31%) and Oaxaca (22%). This limitation must be kept in mind when interpreting the results. As the survey was conducted online, it was not possible to control for a more balanced distribution. Figure 1 provides an overview of responses obtained from different federal states.

Figure 1 Percentage distribution of survey responses by Federal State (N=283)
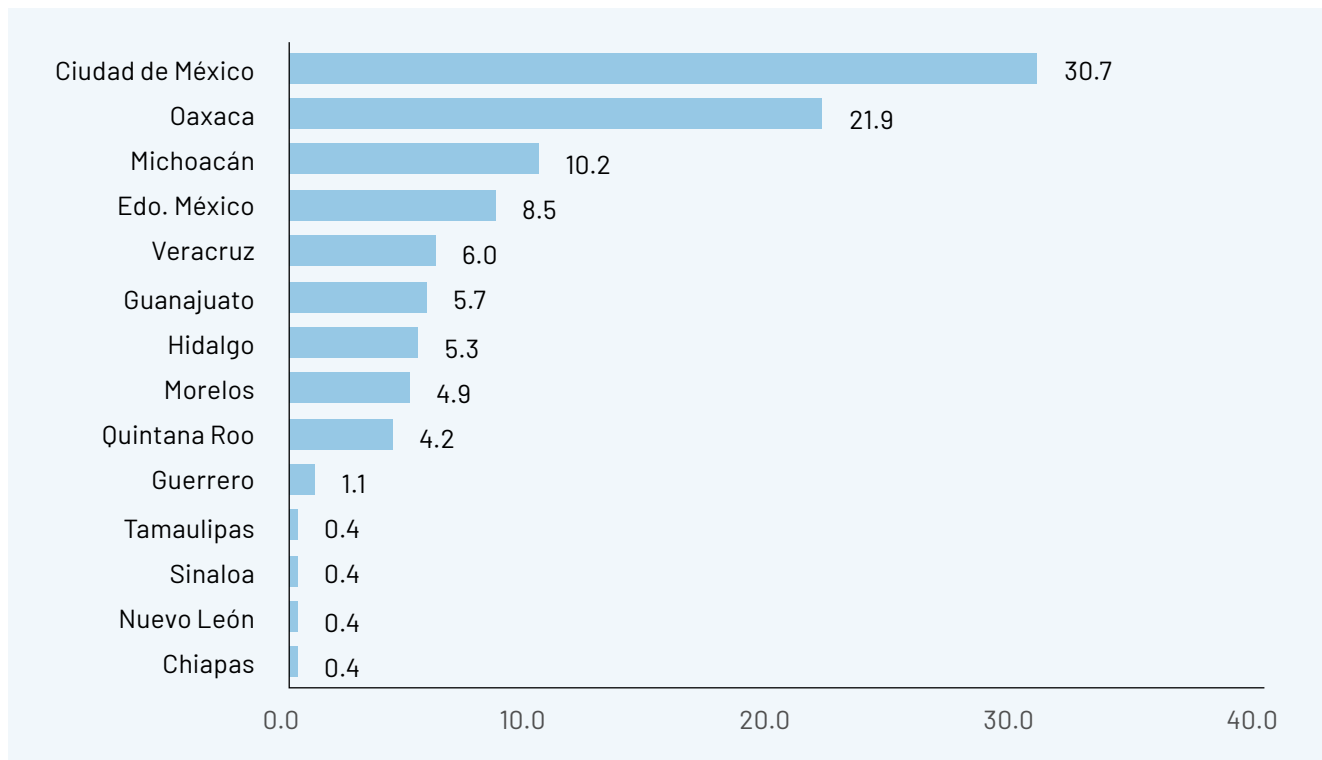
Source: Prepared by the authors based on the exploratory survey on social media use among adolescents.

Research findings

The following sections summarise research results related to:

1. perceptions of being a man and masculinity in offline spaces

2. social media use and online content consumed

3. social media and its impacts on masculinity norms among adolescent boys.

Perceptions of being a man and masculinity in offline spaces

The adolescent boys and young men who participated in the qualitative research had developed their perception of what it means to be a man primarily in offline environments, with the family being the main site of learning about gender norms and stereotypes. Their family members would, for example, reproduce gender norms in how household tasks are distributed, in the toys with which boys and girls are allowed to play, the colours they can use and in the rules of how they should behave, with many boys being constantly told that 'men don't cry'.

While many of the participants were raised by single mothers, these gender roles persisted, with the eldest sons often becoming providers alongside their mothers. By the time they reached adolescence and began to access social media, most had already internalised ideas of masculinity that associate

being a man with strength, toughness, bravery, leadership, heterosexuality and being a provider. The strength of these ideas can be seen in Figure 2, a word cloud showing the terms that adolescent boys and girls surveyed most commonly associated with the word 'man'. These words include 'strong/strength' ('fuerte', 'fuerza'), 'hard-working' ('trabajador') and 'tall' ('alto'), for example, reflecting adolescents' views of the stereotyped physical, personality and behavioural characteristics socially expected of men.[1]

Figure 2 First words that come to mind among survey respondents when they hear the word 'man'


The workshops confirm these survey results. The Photovoice output highlighted in Figure 3 shows an example of adolescents' perceptions of what is socially expected of a man. Asked 'what a man is like', participants drew a muscular man and, next to the drawing, wrote what society expects of a man's personality: being possessive, manipulative, heterosexual, an alpha male, the one in charge in a couple's relationship. They seem to draw Gaston, a fictional character from the Walt Disney Pictures film Beauty and the Beast, who is characterised by being self-centred, conceited, arrogant and determined to conquer the protagonist, even by force.

While these beliefs are formed mainly in offline environments, such stereotypes can then be reinforced or challenged in online spaces. Gender stereotypes limit boys' emotional and personal development. At the same time, some young men participating in the research had begun to question rigid gender roles and to adopt more flexible and diverse views of what it means to be a man.

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1   Other larger words in the word cloud include 'masculine' (masculino), 'person' (persona), male chauvinism ('machismo') and 'human' ('humano').

Figure 3 Photovoice output: 'The macho'
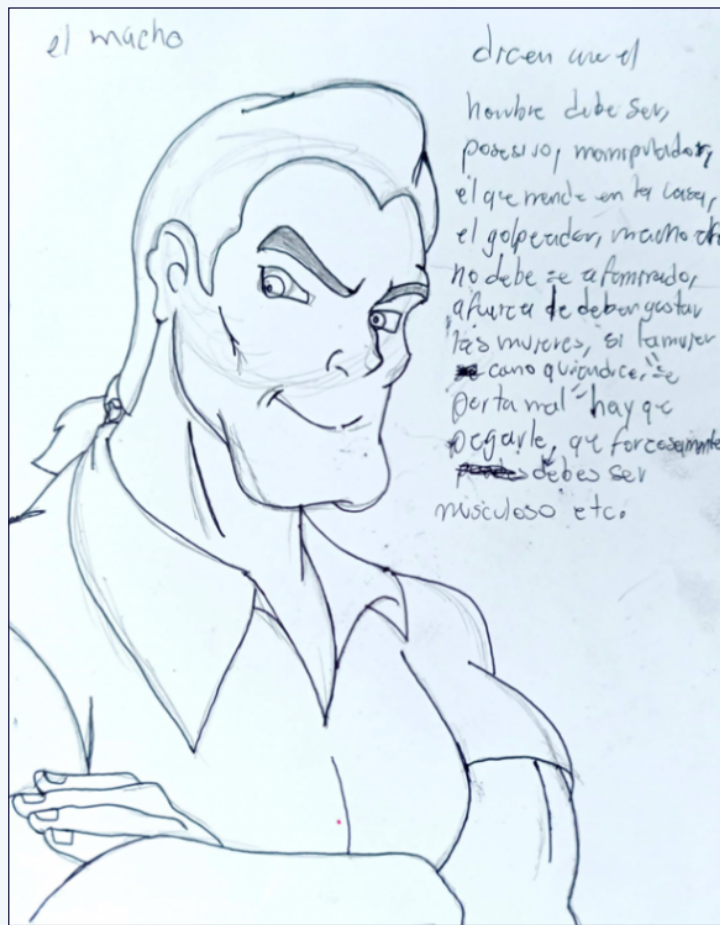
Author: Drawing for a response map developed by an adolescent boy participating in the Photovoice workshop, Mexico City
They say that the man should be possessive, manipulative, the one in charge of the relationship, the batterer, the alpha male. He must not be effeminate, he must like women. If the woman, as they say, 'misbehaves', you have to hit her. He must be muscular.

Social media use and content consumed

The vast majority of survey respondents (95% of adolescents) had their own mobile phone. On average, they first accessed the Internet at 10.6 years old. The platforms they use most frequently are:

- WhatsApp (87.6%)
- TikTok (80.2%)
- Instagram (77.7%)
- Facebook (64.7%)
- YouTube (61.1%).

These findings are consistent with findings from the workshops, with participants accessing social media primarily through smartphones, starting at the age of around 12 years old.

There are marked differences in how boys and girls use social media, some of which reflect existing gender roles and stereotypes. Amongst other things, boys and young men are more likely to use Telegram, Discord and OnlyFans, a video hosting platform used mainly by the creators of pornography. During the workshops, adolescents often mentioned Telegram as one of the most unsafe platforms, where users are connected with strangers, explicit content circulates and safety measures are lacking,

such as features to report content or users. In general, boys reported having more interest in sports, video games, cars and mechanics, and sexually explicit content.

As further discussed below, the survey reveals that teenagers consume content that reinforces male stereotypes and discriminatory gender norms, with more than half (56%) of boys surveyed saying that they often view memes that discriminate against LGBTQI+ people, and more than a third (39%) reporting that they often see content that mocks women.

The boys participating in the qualitative research primarily follow male influencers and content-producers, often admiring them as role models who have achieved respect, fame, professional and financial success. While they also report following some female influencers, they appreciate these primarily for their physical attractiveness. All of the female influencers they mentioned have a presence on OnlyFans. This suggests that the influencers viewed by the adolescent boys reproduce a hierarchy of men as powerful agents and women as sexual objects.

> When I was younger, I always felt very insecure about my body, but when I started training, I began to like my personality, I started to take photos of myself without a shirt on, and so, already sweaty, already pumped up, my body pumping, 'bam!' I would take a photo.
>
> Testimony of a young man, DiPa workshop, Juchitán, Oaxaca

Social media and its impact on masculinity norms among adolescents

The research suggests that main impacts of social media use on the construction of masculinity among adolescents include:

Stereotypes about the male body: Social media send strong signals about what an 'ideal' male body looks like, with almost two thirds of adolescent boys participating in the survey (63%) reporting seeing images of muscular bodies on their social networks. According to the qualitative research, the idealized male body shown in social media content accessed by boys in Mexico is not only strong, big and muscular, but also has characteristics such as a white complexion and Western features. This stereotype, which is present both offline and online, puts pressure on teenagers to conform to a physical – often unattainable – ideal. Many adolescent boys, particularly those involved in sport, justify their internalisation of these norms by linking it to fitness, health and self-care. However, as illustrated by the results from the DiPa and Photovoice workshops on this issue, our research suggests that they are often preoccupied with their physical appearance and that their self-confidence depends, in part, on their ability to conform to such physical stereotypes. Sport, for example, is seen as a tool to construct masculine identity, reproducing values such as competitiveness and success as well as being a pathway to physical health.

Men's role as economic providers: In offline contexts, men are expected to be providers from an early age. This is particularly true in marginalised communities, where some adolescents take on economic responsibilities before adulthood. In the online environment, this norm is amplified through influencers who showcase luxurious lifestyles (displaying travel, restaurant visits, unboxings[2] or videos of themselves giving away money and ostentatious material objects), reinforcing the idea that economic success is central to masculinity.

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2   Social media videos showing someone removing a newly purchased product from its packaging and examining its features.

Figure 4 The art of being a man

Author: YFR013, 15 years old

Description of recreated photo:Every man likes to show himself strong and attractive by exercising to look more handsome. For men, looking strong is important because it makes them look 100 percent attractive. This is how they like to show themselves on the networks to meet more people and make friends. This gives them security and strengthens their self-esteem.

Almost three quarters of adolescent boys (72%) participating in the survey report seeing social media images of men with money and symbols of luxury. Some influencers, including some representing the popular musical genre *'corridos tumbados'*[3], normalise and glorify narco-culture and highlight organised crime as the fast track to money and power (and, therefore, masculine success).

Adolescent boys feel pressure to project an image of economic success on social media, even if it does not reflect their reality. To conform to this pressure, many go so far as to display fake experiences and belongings (such as someone else's motorbike, see below) and some look for quick ways to make money, including by engaging in illicit activities. These can, in turn, be facilitated by social media platforms as spaces where products can be easily sold or acquired.

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3   Also known as 'trap corridos', corridos tumbados is a sub-genre of regional Mexican music (of a corrido) which originated in the mid-2010s.

Figure 5 My motobike, your motobike

Authors: Anonymous participants, 17 and 18 years-old.

In the corners of the Internet, men lend their belongings, allowing others to boast them as their own. Between filters and hashtags, every lender aims not only to share but also to cultivate an aura of success and power, while those on the receiving end move ahead on the path towards a higher status, adorned by the appearance of ephemeral but dazzling possessions.

Relationships and dating: Although the teenagers in this study do not see social media as their main source of learning about romantic relationships, they recognise that these platforms offer content about men's relationship expectations and behaviours. Three quarters (75%) of adolescent boys participating in the survey have seen sexual content on social media and more than half (53%) have seen influencers explaining how to 'pick up' women. Influencers also offer wider relationship advice, promoting attitudes such as emotional independence and superficiality, which reinforce gender stereotypes that limit emotional responsibility and encourage macho behaviour.

While some content promotes the figure of the 'gentleman' who is courteous towards women, this role can also depend on – and serve to display – the male economic success required to buy gifts for girlfriends and romantic interests. Disseminated through social media, music is also influential in this context, with popular genres often normalising the objectification of women, male domination and violent relationships. Some social media influencers who are well-known among the boys also disseminate models of non-monogamous relationships, some as a lifestyle that increases male power and dominance. However, some content on more diverse relationships models aims to normalise sexual diversity, providing information and psychological support.

Self-esteem and self-care: Male self-esteem and self-care content is popular among adolescents and young men. Some of this content promotes male independence in areas such as finances, emotions and the home (effectively encouraging boys and men to take on more roles traditionally performed by women and girls), while also reinforcing macho ideas by portraying women as self-interested and reducing relationships to sexual aspects alone. While some adolescents find emotional support and self-esteem in these spaces, others criticise such content as misogynistic and

unconstructive. According to testimonies from boys, secret 'men-only' groups are now being created on social media so that men and boys can share and talk about content produced by misogynistic male 'self-care' influencers. Within these groups, men reproduce a discourse of hate against women and carry out online attacks against female influencers and feminist collective pages. However, there are also pages that promote self-care without reproducing dominant and harmful stereotypes, focusing on physical and mental well-being as part of personal growth. Many adolescent boys value and follow this content as a helpful contribution to their development and well-being and as a positive way of rethinking masculinity.

Figure 6 The Influencer
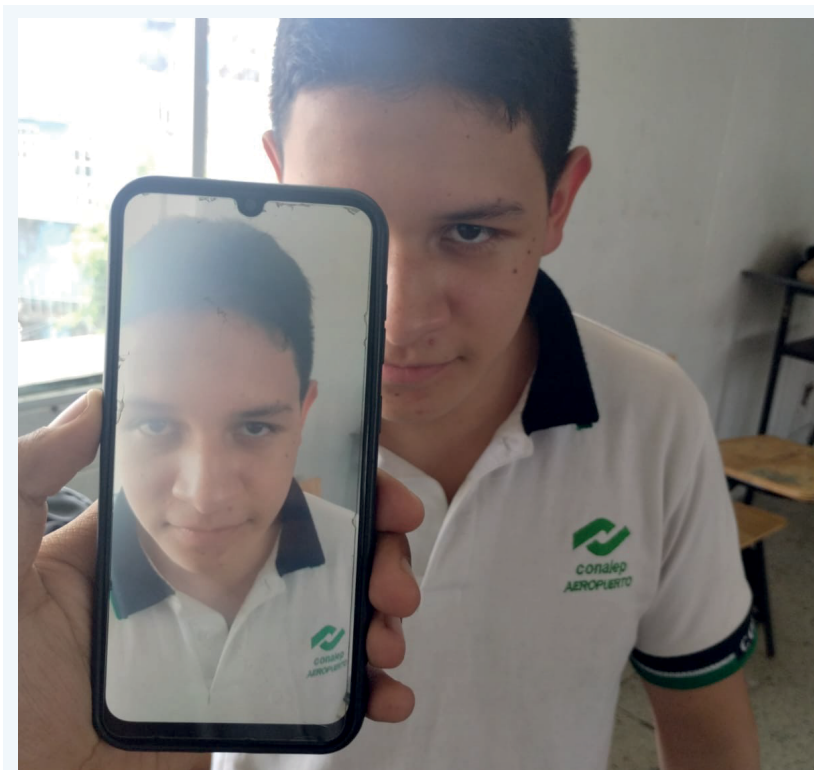
Author: Daniel Israel Gómez Quiñónez, 16 years.

Young people of my generation want to be influencers because they see other people doing it on social media and they want to be like them. To achieve this and gain popularity, they have to do what is trendy on social media: record themselves singing and playing video games.

Expressions of friendship and emotions: Online and offline interaction between adolescent boys is characterised by physical and verbal behaviour that can appear violent, such as hitting or teasing. The expression 'That's how we get along' ('Así nos llevamos) sums up this dynamic, reflecting a camaraderie and loyalty between friends. Humour is their form of social connection and expression of affection, and means that they can avoid direct displays of emotion, as many hide their feelings for fear of judgement. Private WhatsApp and Facebook groups between friends not only help them to arrange to meet each other and play games, but also to share jokes and humour. They may do this through memes referring to a member of the group or a situation they are going through or by sharing photos of themselves to joke around, for example. Sharing memes, their status or music on social media also allows boys to express their feelings and emotions more freely. Another mechanism for releasing emotions and justifying vulnerability is the consumption of alcohol, a behaviour that is reinforced by content on social media that promotes using alcohol and other substances. Most of the boys surveyed (71%) have seen content on social media that shows men using alcohol or drugs.

Normalisation of bullying, grooming and harassment: Social media platforms also allow for interactions with strangers, some of which may be unwanted. Some adolescents had received

comments about their appearance that they interpret as compliments, but they also reported feeling uncomfortable or having been victims of grooming. Although they are aware of the concept of grooming, the boys who took part in the research have normalised it for three reasons. First, they believe they are less vulnerable than women. Second, they see it as a compliment or as a way of flirting. And third, as a result of the pressure of the masculine norm of virility, they accept harassment by adult women to avoid being singled out as 'less manly'. This leaves them open to harassment by adult women and men. Cyberbullying is also common among adolescents, through pages that expose people ('funar') for inappropriate behaviour, generating fear among boys and young men, particularly of false accusations by women.

Search for popularity: Social media influences the construction of social identity, and popularity is linked to stereotypes of masculinity that value success. 'Likes' are seen as a form of social approval. While most adolescents claim that they are not on social networks to gain popularity, they acknowledge adding strangers to widen their social circle and some even buy 'likes'. They also recognise a difference between boys/men and girls/women in gaining popularity, with some men believing that women and girls gain more followers by sexualising their content, while boys gain popularity with 'masculine' risk-taking behaviour, such as smoking or drinking.

Final reflections

Social media platforms are an extension of adolescents' offline experiences and relationships, and have a significant influence on their identity, their beliefs and their perceptions of masculinity. Our study reveals that online and offline environments are intertwined and work together to reinforce gender norms, affecting how young people view themselves and their relationships.

The social media content consumed by adolescents reflects and perpetuates dominant masculinity norms, highlighting characteristics such as strength, wealth and the male provider as masculine ideals. Influencers play a crucial role in the construction of masculine identity, promoting a model that associates success with physical appearance and economic status. This can put pressure on young men to conform to these standards, causing insecurities and leading to risk-taking behaviour in their search for acceptance. Despite the influence of stereotypes, some social media platforms – as well as young men themselves – are beginning to question traditional models of masculinity.

Our findings demonstrate the need to foster spaces where adolescent boys and young men can express their thoughts and emotions, helping them to develop a critical awareness of gender narratives on social media. It is also essential to promote new masculinities that accept vulnerability and the diversity of bodies and reject violence. This calls for a joint effort between content creators and consumers.

References

See main report for full reference list.

ALiGN | Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms

About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

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