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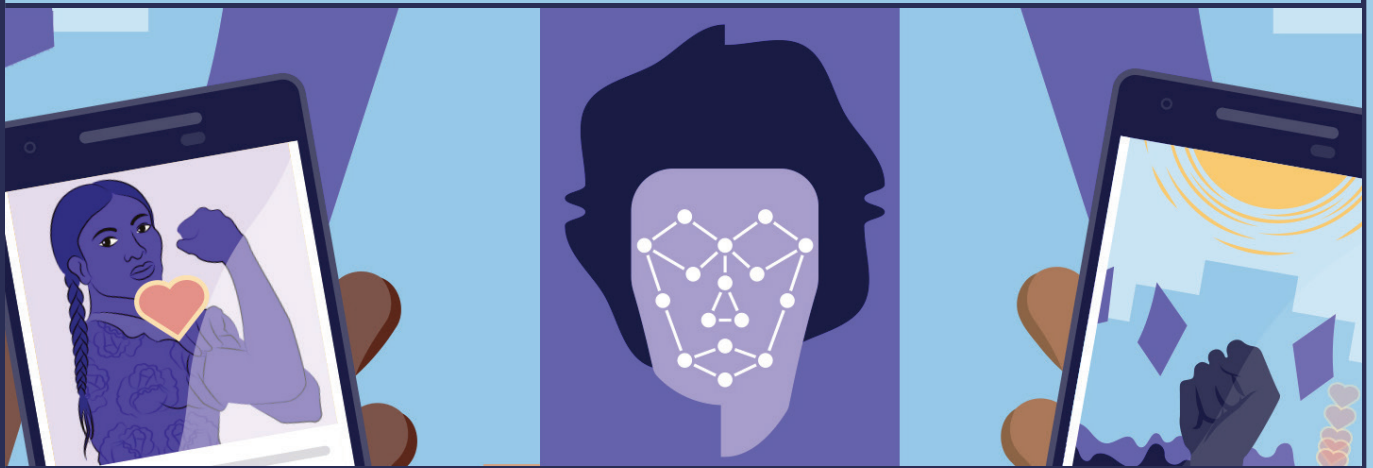
ALIGN REPORT

How does social media influence gender norms among adolescent boys?

A review of evidence

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Acknowledgements

Note: This report is one of a series of ALIGN outputs on the theme of social media use and gender norms among adolescent boys. The following related products can be downloaded from the [ALIGN platform](#):

- Diepeveen, S. (2024) 'How do online media influence gender norms among adolescent boys? Key evidence and policy Implications'. Policy Note. London: ODI.

- Spreadsheet of studies that examine the connections between social media use and gender norms among adolescent boys and young men.

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Glossary

Adolescent – person aged 10-19 years.

Femininity – social and cultural norms associated with being a woman or girl. Conceptualisations of femininity vary across social and cultural contexts, and over time.

Gender norms – social norms that define socially acceptable behaviour, roles, entitlements and gender expression for people who identify (or are identified by others) as male or female. They intersect with norms related to other aspects of identity (such as age, for example) and thus vary considerably within as well as across cultures (Harper et al., 2020).

Incel – a misogynistic online subculture of men and boys who define themselves as unable to find a sexual partner, and who blame women, the feminist movement and society. More extreme subcultures view this as legitimating violence against women.

Manosphere – a loosely connected network of websites and social media platforms that promote misogyny online (Kimeu, 2023).

Masculinity – social and cultural norms associated with being a man or boy. Conceptualisations of masculinity vary across social and cultural contexts, and over time.

Meme – a typically humorous image, video or piece of text that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations.

Messaging apps – apps such as WhatsApp that are primarily designed to communicate with existing contacts, though through groups have the potential to link people with unknown others.

Misogyny – hatred of or antipathy or prejudice towards women and girls

Self-objectification – viewing oneself as a physical object more than a human being. This often involves thinking about oneself from a third-person perspective.

Sexism – prejudice, stereotyping or discrimination on the basis of sex, usually to the detriment of women and girls.

Social media – internet-based channels that enable users to interact and self- present with either broad and/or narrow audiences (paraphrased from Carr and Hayes, 2015).

Young people – people aged 15-24 years.

Executive summary

Background

Adolescents and young people today are, in many countries, the first generation to have grown up with social media. Given the sexist content now circulating online, there is widespread concern about the potential impact of social media exposure on gender norms among this generation. Previous research has tended to focus on the impacts of online gender inequality on girls and women. However, the rise of misogynistic influencers such as Andrew Tate, and increasing awareness of incel violence has contributed to a growing focus on the potential negative influence of social media use on boys and young men.

This report reviews available evidence on the effects of social media on gender norms and ideals for male behaviour (masculinities) among adolescent boys. It is based on a review of academic and grey studies in English, French, German and Spanish, identified through keyword searches, reviewing references and citations in the documents found, and recommendations from experts. The report draws on 51 studies that provide insights on the influence of social media on gender norms among adolescent boys and young men, and related studies that offer broader observations linked to this topic.

Main findings

1. **Attempts to identify any 'general' impacts of social media use on gender norms among adolescent boys are asking the wrong question**. Social media comprises many platforms, which adolescents use in different ways at different times. Any effects of use are likely to differ depending on factors such as the platforms used, the type and nature of content accessed, and the amount of time spent on social media. The effects are also likely to vary considerably from one context to another and between different individuals.

2. **Few studies have focused specifically on the effects of social media use on gender norms or masculinity among adolescent boys:** more have analysed the gendered nature of online content. Academic research on the impacts on gender norms has largely examined effects on sexist attitudes or attitudes to body image, rather than overall ideas of what it means to be a boy or man (masculinity). The time lag between the growing awareness of a phenomenon, research on it and eventual publication means that there is a lack of published research on the impact of exposure to misogynistic influencers.

3. **The existing body of research on the impacts of social media use on gender norms among adolescent boys and young men is not cohesive, and conclusions are not necessarily generalisable**. The studies reviewed use diverse measures both of social media use and aspects of gender norms. This means that results are not always comparable and cannot be 'added up' in a straightforward way to point to an overall conclusion on effects. The vast majority (80%) of the empirical studies reviewed that focused on specific countries were undertaken in Europe and the US, largely with relatively homogenous populations, and may not be widely generalisable. For all these reasons, the studies reviewed do not provide a comprehensive evidence base to address increasingly pressing policy concerns about the influence of misogynistic online content on gender norms among adolescent boys. Where possible, this report attempts to tease out the implications of the studies reviewed, and highlights where caution is needed in doing so.

4. **Some of the studies reviewed do, however, suggest that there is cause for concern**. Studies show that misogynistic content is widely available to teenagers and harmful content not always removed. Five quantitative studies of the impacts of social media on gender norms and attitudes found aspects of the use of social media to be associated with some aspects of sexist attitudes. Six found an association between social media use and certain body image concerns, which can reflect a desire to conform to stereotyped gender norms. Evidence of associations cannot simply be interpreted as the result of the influence of social media on gender norm, and studies do not tend to find associations between all of their measures of social media use and/ or gender norms. Nevertheless, some aspects of gender norms may be more closely linked to social media than others, such as pressure to conform to an idealised physical appearance.

5. **At the same time, studies caution against making blanket statements about the negative effects of social media and some point to positive potential**. Social media offers spaces where inequitable gender norms are challenged as well as reinforced (sometimes simultaneously). Adolescents use social media in a variety of ways and demonstrate considerable agency in how they do so, with some seeking out opportunities to experiment with less gender-stereotypical self-presentation. Three quantitative and mixed methods studies found that the use of the internet or social media predicted more gender-equitable attitudes, and two found no association between aspects of social media use and gender norms. A range of qualitative research points to mixed effects and mutual reinforcement. While the quantitative studies reviewed often assume that the direction of influence is from social media to individuals' attitudes and behaviours, they tend to suggest that existing gender norms not only influence social media experiences, they are also being shaped by them.

6. The emerging findings suggest that **the impact on adolescents is likely to depend on how they interact with social media and the nature of the content they see or use**. Relevant factors can include the amount of time spent on social media, the type of content consumed (or produced), whether their use of social media is active or passive, and the types of users an individual interacts with, for example. Platforms that allow users to be anonymous and options for disappearing content appear to provide opportunities for adolescents to express themselves more freely. While some use this space to explore less gender-conforming ways of being, the same features can also provide openings for the expression of discriminatory attitudes and behaviours without being held to account.

7. **Adolescents' use of social media both shapes and is shaped by gender norms that prevail in their families, peer networks and other important social groups**. Online and offline spaces merge into one another, and adolescents' online experiences often reflect their offline lives. Indeed, the qualitative literature reviewed in this report suggests that adolescents tend to select and interpret content based on their existing interests and attitudes. Few studies have focused on the relative importance of social media compared with 'offline' messaging on social norms. Those that do often highlight the importance of factors such as education and family, peer and community influences. This reinforces the importance of efforts to promote more equitable norms in the offline sphere, as well as in online spaces. Strengthening adolescents' critical awareness of gender roles and norms offline may help to counter any negative effects of their online engagement.

8. **Some adolescents may be more susceptible than others to the effects of social media,** depending on, for example, their existing attitudes or their reactions to peer pressure. However, there is very limited research on whether there are common characteristics among boys who are particularly influenced by misogynistic online content in their attitudes to gender norms. It is also important to stress that efforts to identify any such characteristics need to be wary of the risk of stigmatising or stereotyping particular social groups, and potentially reinforcing the trends they seek to counter.

9. **The 'back-end' of social media platforms – the operation of algorithms, their business models and extent of regulation – has a critical, but under-appreciated, impact on the content accessed by adolescents**. The way in which social media algorithms work, for example, means that adolescents who start to view sexist content are likely to be shown more of it, which could radicalise their existing attitudes. This neglect of the wider context and of the incentives that drive social media companies means that important entry points for tackling harm are being missed. Recent evidence suggests that, despite content moderation policies, violent and misogynistic content is still widely available and that more effective action in this area is a priority.

While further research is needed, what we do know (and what we do not), points to the need for nuance and care in the debate on the impact of social media on gender norms and masculinities among adolescent boys. Rather than framing social media as a risk in general, it is helpful to focus on the dangers, but also the positive potential, of particular kinds of use in a specific context. This requires understanding how specific patterns of social media use reflect and interact with other offline factors.

Adolescents' use of social media both shapes and is shaped by gender norms. © Exposure Visuals | Shutterstock: 1818278237

1. Introduction

Today's adolescents and young people are the first generation in history to have grown up in the era of social media. In many countries, boys and girls often spend hours each day on Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube and other platforms that enable them to create and share content in virtual communities. With social media playing such a central role in youth and adolescence – a critical stage in identity development – families, educators, researchers and practitioners are increasingly asking what impacts the use of social media may have on the development of this new generation.

Concerns have intensified alongside a growing awareness of the wide range of potentially harmful messages circulating online. They include highly misogynistic social media content, role models and communities, all of which may have an impact on teenagers' perceptions of gender norms: what they and others are expected to be and do based on their gender. In the UK, for example, teachers have recently raised the alarm about an increase in gender stereotypes and sexism among students that has been linked to more time spent online during the Covid-19 lockdowns (Dimsdale, 2023).

While social media may have an impact on gender norms among both boys and girls, discussion and analysis have previously tended to focus on such effects among women and girls. Given the stereotyped and sexist representations of female bodies on social media, research has, in particular, explored the outcomes for body image among adolescent girls and young women. Examples include Meier and Gray (2014), Tiggemann and Miller (2010), and Vandenbosch and Eggermont (2012).

The potential influence on boys and young men has, however, become a growing concern in public debate (certainly in Europe and North America), not least because of the popularity of misogynistic influencers such as Andrew Tate, the 'poster boy for toxic masculinity', whose videos have been watched billions of times on YouTube (Mance, 2023). A survey in the UK 2023 found that 85% of boys aged 13 to 15 had heard of Andrew Tate. Further, 23% of the boys interviewed had a favourable view of him (Smith, 2023). A similar survey in Australia in 2022 found that 92% of boys interviewed knew who Andrew Tate was and 28% considered him a role model (Madigan, 2023). The extent to which the boys surveyed agreed with Tate's messages is discussed in more detail in Section 4.2.). A recent study shows how misogynistic online content has become normalised and moved from specialised incel sites to much more widely used platforms, in part via material focused on boys' and men's mental health and self-improvement (Regehr et al., 2024). Tate is perhaps the best known example of this wider trend.

The report is organised as follows. Section 1.1 presents further details on the research methodology. Section 2 presents key concepts and summarises evidence on adolescents' gendered patterns of social media use. Section 3 presents the available current research on the association between social media and gender norms among adolescent boys, and some of the difficulties associated with the interpretation of its findings. Section 4 explores some of the factors that influence the ways in which adolescents engage with and interpret social media posts. Section 5 synthesises key insights from the study and identifies key areas for further research.

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1.1 Methodology

This report draws on recent research to ask the following questions:

- What is known about the effects of social media use on gender norms, stereotypes and ideals of masculinity among adolescent boys?

- How do any effects occur, and what may influence the effects of social media?

- What increases the impact of social media on gender norms? In particular, what platform features and social factors shape individual susceptibility to the messages encountered on social media?

The report is based on a review of literature that took place from March to June 2023 and focused on the impact of social media use on gender norms – and particularly masculinity – among adolescent boys. It also includes the findings of a few studies published after this period.

To identify relevant academic and grey literature, the research team undertook searches with multiple relevant search-term combinations in English, French, German and Spanish on Google Scholar. These included keywords around:

- social media (and associated terms, such as names of individual platforms)

- gender norms (and associated terms such as masculinity, misogyny, gender relations, gender stereotypes)

- boys (and associated terms such as [male] adolescents, teenagers, men, amongst others)

- impacts or effects of social media on gender norms.

Exchanges with several key scholars in the field pointed to additional and upcoming academic research.

Policy or practitioner-oriented research was identified through Google searches. As the lack of research outside Europe and the US was identified at an early stage, a research assistant ran additional searches to identify studies in other regions, focusing particularly on Africa and Latin America. Further relevant studies were identified by snowballing (reviewing the references and citations in the studies found).

The relevance of individual papers was assessed by screening titles and abstracts, and those seen as relevant were then reviewed in full. They included a number of literature reviews focusing on wider themes related to youth, (social) media and gender norms. Annex 1 provides an overview of the key studies reviewed in relation to the effects of social media use on gender norms among adolescent boys and young men.

This study was not designed as a systematic review and is not exhaustive. Nevertheless, the search process followed up leads until they ceased to produce relevant studies and considered a number of inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify studies for in-depth review. The key inclusion criteria are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Included	Excluded	Comments
Population	Should relate to adolescent boys (aged 10–19), from any geographical location; may include other groups, such as girls, women, young men or younger boys.	Other social groups.	In practice, most studies were of cisgender adolescents1 from the US. Given limited research with adolescent boys, relevant studies with (young) men were included.
Focus	Must provide insights into the effects of social media use on gender norms. Evidence on effects on the norms of masculinity and misogyny/attitudes that underpin sexism was of particular interest.	• Broader studies of social media use among adolescents (not related to gender norms). • Studies of topics related to masculinity (e.g. violence on social media) without a specific or explicit focus on gender norms. • Studies of the effects of consuming online porn on gender norms among adolescents.	Many more studies examined the content of social media or gender differences in social media use than sought to probe the effects of its use on gender norms (a summary spreadsheet with these studies is available to download from www.alignplatform.org). The review did not specifically search for literature on the effects of social media use on adolescent sexuality and sexual orientation, dating practices, violence or trans/ intersex adolescents.
Platforms	Social Media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube	Messaging apps, dating platforms.	This review focuses on platforms that include public-facing content, and not those that are solely/primarily messaging-based. In practice, there is considerable cross-over between platforms as users share TikTok or YouTube content via messaging apps.
Type of publication	Peer reviewed academic or policy literature. PhD theses.	MA or BA theses.	The striking number of student theses found indicates growing interest in this field.
Date of publication and language	Must be published from 2015–2023 in English, French, German or Spanish.	Published before 2015.	Including research in other languages would extend insights, particularly of contexts outside Europe and North America.
Interventions	Beyond the scope of this review.		A more focused review of insights from online interventions would be valuable, including efforts to challenge discriminatory gender norms with adolescents.

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1   While some studies reviewed asked young people their sex at birth and current gender identity, individuals for whom these diverged were sometimes excluded from statistical analysis because of the small sizes of the samples.

A total of 51 studies met these criteria and were reviewed in detail. Of these, 21 focused on Europe and 12 on the US. Of the remainder, two were from Mexico, and one each from Brazil, India, Israel and New Zealand. Two compared several countries globally and ten did not focus exclusively on a specific location (e.g. reviews of global literature or theory-based articles).[2] The primary research studies were fairly evenly split in their use of methods (23 employed qualitative and mixed methods, and 20 quantitative methods). The remainder were a combination of theoretically-focused studies or literature reviews.

Some studies included in the review focus on broader issues (beyond attitudes to gender equality), such as body image. These were included because they discuss gender norms specifically or relate particularly strongly to the development of gender norms and identities in adolescence. For example, a pressure to look 'masculine' can play a particularly significant role in adolescence as young people affirm their gendered roles and identities. Male body image forms an important aspect of incel ideology.[3]

Limitations

The choice of studies to include or exclude, together with the following limitations, may have had an impact on the findings of the review. Some key limitations include the following.

Factors related to the search process

- The time lag between research and publication (particularly for academic studies) means that the research found does not fully respond to emerging developments such as the rise of misogynistic influencers and the incelosphere, or to the range of content that young people currently view (entertainment of different kinds, information of varying degrees of accuracy, etc.) Studies under way at the time of writing are starting to redress these gaps (e.g. Haslop et al., 2024, forthcoming).

- Relevant insights may have been embedded in studies that do not discuss masculinity or gender norms explicitly, but that do explore relevant attitudes and behaviours (such as research on social media and violence). Further examination of such studies would be valuable.

Limitations of the evidence base

Lack of social and cultural diversity in studies

- Geographical biases. The empirical studies that were found focus primarily on European countries and the US. Of the 51 publications reviewed, only eight focused on other countries and these were largely middle to high-income countries.

- The adolescents and young people within the studies are rarely diverse, with participants often recruited from a single region or educational institution, and often from ethnically homogenous and socio-economically advantaged groups.

- It is not yet clear how far findings from these studies can be generalised to a wider range of contexts. As further discussed below (Section 4.5), what we do know suggests that social media use and its effects are likely to differ across different settings.

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2 Of these, two focused particularly (but not exclusively) on Germany.
3 A recent study of incel-adjacent fora found that a body image-focused forum was the one with the most participants (CCDH Quant Lab., 2022).

Lack of research with younger age groups

- Few studies focus on the experience of adolescent boys (as opposed to young adults), and in particular young adolescents. Only four of the studies reviewed focused specifically on boys aged 12 and younger. Their relative neglect has been highlighted as a wider trend in research on gender roles, youth and social media (Koschei, 2021). However, available studies suggest that social media experiences and effects may vary considerably across different age groups and periods of identity development.

Limited focus on effects on masculinity norms among adolescent boys

- Analyses of gendered content substantially outnumber studies of the gendered impact of social media use. While content-focused studies often assume that such content will have a significant impact on gender-related beliefs (e.g. Döring, 2015; Parks et al., 2022; Pérez-Torres et al., 2018), this assumption is rarely examined empirically. The predominance of content analyses has also been noted as a wider trend in research on youth, gender roles and social media (Koschei, 2021; Guo, 2022).

- Studies of exposure to online misogyny focus, understandably, on the effects on women and girls. Those that do focus on the effects on men and boys do not tend to examine the impact on overall ideas of what it means to be a man (masculinity). This reflects trends in wider literature on media (including social media) and gender stereotypes (Götz and Prommer, 2021; Ward and Grower, 2020). Instead, most of the research identified relates to effects on sexist attitudes or body image. This means that the studies reviewed address questions about the effects of social media use on ideals of masculinity among adolescent boys only to a limited extent (and often indirectly).

Methodological limitations and lack of comparability

- Many quantitative studies build on theoretical perspectives developed in studies of mass media, particularly TV, which may not be fully applicable to more individualised experiences of social media use (see Annex 2 for more details of key theoretical approaches). These perspectives influence both the framing of studies and methodological choices. In particular, they contribute to framing that emphasises social media as an 'external' force that acts upon people, and often under-emphasises adolescents' agency in using different platforms and apps.

- The quantitative studies reviewed fall largely within the discipline of psychology, while a smaller number of studies, both qualitative and quantitative, build on sociological perspectives. Psychological studies, in particular, are often concerned with issues of body image or emotional wellbeing; relatively few discuss issues related to gender norms directly.

- The majority of quantitative studies use scales developed in the field of psychology to measure outcomes. The scales used vary widely across the studies reviewed (as shown in Annex 1). This means that the measures used are rarely comparable, which makes it harder to draw conclusions about the body of evidence as a whole.

- Many of the quantitative studies identified are correlational. As will be further discussed in this report, this makes it difficult to interpret whether any identified associations can be understood as demonstrating the influence of social media on gender norms, the influence of gender norms on social media, or neither.

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2. Key concepts and background

2.1 Gender norms, masculinity and adolescence

Gender norms refer to the informal rules for expected behaviour based on gender. These vary between different social groups and cultural contexts, and intersect with other characteristics and facets of identity. Gender norms – like other aspects of culture – shift in response to varied influences, such as economic and technological change (Harper et al., 2020).

Masculinity (or masculinities) refers to societal ideals of what it means to be a man or a boy. Like all gender norms, norms of masculinity vary across different cultures and communities and evolve constantly. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant form of masculinity in a specific context (e.g. Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

A systematic review of norms of masculinity among adolescents (drawn mostly from studies in North America and Western Europe) found that young adolescents generally endorsed masculinity norms related to:

- physical toughness (e.g., showing higher tolerance for pain, engaging in fights, competing in sports)

- autonomy (e.g., being financially independent, protecting and providing for families)

- emotional stoicism (e.g. not showing vulnerabilities, dealing with problems on one's own)

- heterosexual prowess (e.g., having sex with many girls, exercising control over girls in relationships) (Amin et al., 2018).

Some of the studies examined in this review suggest that manifesting these ideals (e.g. strength, toughness and dominance) physically through a 'masculine' physique (e.g. muscles and height) can be an important way in which young people try to conform to gender norms.

While gender norms shape people's lives at any age, they often have a distinct impact during the transition from childhood to adulthood. Adolescence is a critical period of identity development and a time when gender norms often start to be enforced more strongly. As they move from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, boys face heightened pressures to prove their manhood (Verma and Khurana, 2023). The forms this takes vary cross-culturally. During adolescence boys may be expected to become breadwinners, for example, while adolescent girls often take on more care and household responsibilities (Igras et al., 2014; Lane et al., 2017; Chandra-Mouli et al., 2017). Widespread recognition of adolescence as a time of change means that it is seen as an important window of opportunity to prevent harmful gender norms[4] before they become solidified (John et al., 2017).

Adolescents receive messages on gender norms from a variety of sources at individual, community and societal levels, including family, peers, school, religious institutions and the media. Research suggests that family and peer networks play a particularly strong role in shaping gender attitudes among teenagers (Kågesten et al., 2016). Adolescence is often marked by the increasing role of peers – and the decreasing role of family – in the lives and socialisation of young people. For boys, peer groups can encourage competition, toughness and heterosexual prowess. Boys may challenge each

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4   By harmful gender norms, we mean those gender norms that have detrimental consequences for adolescents' physical and mental health. In the context of this paper we focus on body image concerns that can be tied to gendered norms around physical appearance.

other physically and verbally, encourage risk-taking behaviour (such as drug use) or demand proof of heterosexual interest and/or conquest. Boys who fail to live up to these standards may be bullied or ridiculed by their peers (Mora, 2012, 2013; Ribeiro, 2006; Kågesten et al., 2016).

While media influences also play a greater role from adolescence onwards (John et al., 2017), evidence of the effects of exposure to media – both traditional broadcast media and social media – on gender norms among adolescents is less clear. This is particularly the case in relation to boys and masculinity compared to girls, women and female gender roles (Kågesten et al., 2016; Ward and Grower, 2020).

2.2 Key patterns of social media use among adolescents

In much of the world, studies have focused on internet and social media access, rather than usage patterns (Ghai et al., 2022). While internet access remains highly uneven, recent data show digital gaps closing and, as a result, the growing use of social media (GSMA, 2023).

Most available data on adolescents' overall social media usage patterns come from the US.[5] A study of social media use among US adolescents by the Pew Research Center suggests that 71% used YouTube at least once daily in 2023, 58% used TikTok at least once daily and 51% used Snapchat this frequently. Almost 20% reported being on YouTube or TikTok constantly (Pew Research Center, 2023).[6] This suggests that – at least in contexts of heavy use – social media is likely to be a source of ideas that influence adolescents.[7]

In addition to high levels of use, the varied possibilities that social media present also contribute to its potential influence on gender norms among adolescent users and are summarised in Table 2. All of these aspects could support the expression and normalisation of more diverse gender roles. Conversely, they could also reinforce narrow, stereotyped gender norms. These possibilities are also influenced by more specific features of platforms – discussed further in Section 4.3.

Table 2 Key aspects of social media that may increase the likelihood of impacts on gender norms[8]

Aspect	Potential influence on gender norms
Access to new communities	Can enable access to like-minded others, new knowledge/ perspectives and a sense of being part of a community. Closed communities may provide safe spaces for discussion of controversial or sensitive topics.
New opportunities for self-presentation	Can enable adolescents to try out different identities, both those that conform to or challenge gender norms. Platforms that allow anonymous use can be particularly important from this perspective. The fact that users can post at their convenience enables considered, deliberate self-presentation. This can affect their sense of identity by promoting reflection on who they want to be, providing a record of their identity that they can return to and/or by promoting a view of themselves 'from the outside' ('self-objectification').

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5   In a systematic review by Schønning et al. (2020) examining studies of adolescents' social media use 70% of studies found were from the Global North.

6   The study also noted some differences in usage patterns by gender and race. Most relevant to this review, boys were slightly more likely to use YouTube (95% boys vs 91% of girls) and slightly less likely to use Snapchat and Instagram.

7   The perspective that long-term media exposure use is likely to influence attitudes and behaviour is developed in cultivation theory, initially established to understand the social effects of TV viewing (see, for example, Morgan et al., 2015).

8   Compiled based on Washington and Marcus (2022); Miller et al. (2016); Fox et al. (2015); Scharrer et al. (2023); Couchot-Schiex (2017); Ney (2016); Stein et al. (2021); Bates (2020); Turel (2022); Salomon and Spears-Brown (2019); Renau et al. (2012); Waechter (2021).

Table 2 Key aspects of social media that may increase the likelihood of impacts on gender norms continued

Aspect	Potential influence on gender norms
Social feedback and reinforcement	Feedback functions, such as likes and emojis – as well as a constant stream of content on others' (idealised) lives and identities – can provide 'social feedback' and can strengthen commitment to certain perspectives and forms of behaviour.
	The operation of algorithms – suggesting similar content to that already viewed – also reinforces a certain type of content, and could lead to 'radicalisation' both towards and away from gender-equitable views. The large volume of social media content can create a misleading impression about how widespread specific views are.
Engaging and interactive content	Offers accessible, informal and conversational language and visual content, which can be more engaging than text. The level of interactivity enabled by social media platforms may further increase its appeal and effects as compared to traditional media.

Gendered difference in social media use patterns

Research suggests that gender differences in social media use are common. These distinct usage patterns contribute to boys and girls being exposed to different content, with different potential influences on gender norms. In the UK and the US, for example, studies have suggested that girls spend more time on social networking sites, while boys spend more time playing online games with friends (Rideout et al., 2010; Przybylski and Weinstein, 2017).

Early research suggested that girls and young women were more likely than boys and young men to use social media to bond with close friends.[9] As the number of platforms increased, research has found such sex differences varying by platform:

- girls in the US are more likely to use Instagram and Snapchat with friends (Vannucci and McCauley Ohannesian 2019; McCauley Ohannessian and Vannucci, 2021)

- boys in the US are more likely to use Twitter (now 'X')[10], discussion boards or YouTube (Vannucci and McCauley Ohannesian, 2019; Anderson and Jiang, 2018)

- for boys, online gaming has also become an important space for friendship bonding (Lenhart, 2015; Twenge and Martin, 2020; Mittmann et al., 2022).

Digital communication may help shy boys to bond with their peers (Desjarlais and Willoughby, 2010) and studies suggest that men and boys are more likely to use social media to connect with people beyond their existing networks (for an overview see Manago et al., 2023). Again, studies suggest that the differences between young men and young women vary by platform, with young men more likely to expand their social networks using Twitter or Instagram, while young women are more likely to use Tiktok (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018; Bossen and Kottasz, 2020).

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9   Examples include: Pempek et al. (2009); Ellison et al. (2014); Rideout et al. (2010); Schouten et al. (2007); Valkenburg et al. (2011).

10   During the research period 'Twitter' was renamed 'X'. Most of the studies reviewed refer to it as 'Twitter' and, for simplicity, the name 'Twitter' is used throughout this report.

Online gaming has become an important space for friendship bonding for boys. ©Rawpixel.com | shutterstock: 1111821350

Research suggests that adolescent girls make more use of social media than boys to validate their appearance, spending time and effort to post 'perfect' self-portraits that will generate 'likes' (Yau and Reich, 2018; Manago et al., 2023; Siiback, 2009). Boys may often be rewarded for other types of content that proves their masculinity by showing their courage, strength and (heterosexual) virility (Couchot-Schiex, 2017; Balleys, 2017a; Barbovschi et al., 2017).

Studies tend to suggest that boys are more likely to engage in cyberbullying than girls (Guo, 2016; Shapka et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019; Manago et al., 2023). Dueñas et al. (2016) suggest that the *nature* of insulting others online can also be gendered. Their study in Belgium, Italy, Romania, Spain and the UK analyses discriminatory content on 493 Facebook profiles of 17-24 year-olds. They find that young men tend to post discriminatory posts that are more direct and that are more likely to be directed to ethnic and cultural minorities, while young women discriminate more on the basis of socio-economic group or physical appearance.

Section 3 now reviews the available empirical evidence of the impact of social media on gender norms among adolescent boys. Section 4 then discusses the various factors that emerging research findings suggest are likely to affect these impacts.

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3. Effects of social media on gender norms: current evidence

> **Key take-aways**
>
> - While some of the studies reviewed point to cause for concern about the effects of social media on gender norms among adolescent boys, the evidence cautions against making blanket statements about negative impacts and some studies point to positive potential.
>
> - Five quantitative studies reviewed found aspects of social media use to be associated with some elements of sexist attitudes, while six identified correlations with certain body image concerns. Studies do not tend to find associations between all of their measures of social media use and/or gender norms.
>
> - By contrast, three quantitative and mixed methods studies reviewed highlight associations between social media use and diverse measures of more equitable norms and attitudes, while two studies found no such associations. The qualitative studies reviewed often point to mixed effects.
>
> - Both qualitative and quantitative studies that provide evidence of the nature of the relationship between gender norms and the use of social media tend to suggest that pre-existing gender norms influence patterns of social media use, and that use patterns influence gender norms. They warn against simply interpreting the quantitative associations identified in cross-sectional studies as evidence of a cause and effect relationship or direction of influence.

This section summarises insights from studies that speak to the effects of social media use on inequitable gender norms and stereotypes amongst adolescent boys. The studies reviewed focus on different types of outcomes, including aspects of sexist or stereotypical gender attitudes and norms and body image concerns, which can reflect a desire to conform to stereotyped gender norms. Table 3 provides an overview, while Annex 1 provides a more detailed overview of the studies reviewed, with methodological details and key findings.

Table 3 Summary of findings on associations between social media use and different aspects of gender norms

Evidence of associations with less discriminatory or harmful norms and attitudes	Evidence of no association	Evidence of associations with more discriminatory or harmful norms and attitudes	Evidence of existing norms/ attitudes that shape social media use and influences
Quantitative and mixed methods studies: associations of social media use with aspects of gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes			
Turel (2022), US; Patel et al. (2021), India; Aleon el al. (2019) – Israel	Manago and Pacheco (2019), Mexico; van Oosten et al. (2017), Netherlands	Scharrer and Warren (2022), US; Gil Bermejo et al. (2021), Spain; Tang (2020), US; Mikorski and Szymanski (2017), US; Fox et al. (2015), US	Manago et al. (2023), US; Parent et al. (2019), US; Wright (2017), US; van Oosten et al. (2017), Netherlands
Quantitative studies: associations of social media use with body image concerns			
		Manago et al. (2015), US; de Vries et al. (2016), de Vries et al. (2019), Stein et al. (2021), Germany; Salomon and Spears-Brown (2019),US; Rousseau et al. (2017),Belgium	Rousseau et al. (2017), Belgium
Key relevant results from qualitative studies			
Reinforcement: Pre-existing gender norms shape adolescents' engagement with social media. Online engagement – including peer feedback – can then further increase pressure to conform to gender norms.	**Diverse interpretations:** young people perceive and interpret the same social media content differently, based on their pre-existing attitudes and other personal characteristics. They may, therefore, be affected differently by the same content.		**Diverse spaces and messages:** social media can offer both spaces that reify discriminatory gender norms and offer opportunities to challenge them.
Example studies			
Couchot-Schiex (three studies) France; Ney (2016), Knoll et al. (2013), Austria; Barbovschi et al. (2017), Brazil; Forsman (2017) Sweden.	Chatzopoulou (2020), UK; Bates (2020); Jochim and Gebel (2022), Germany; Maddocks and Parfaite (2023), online content; Martínez and Olsson (2019), Sweden; Scharrer et al. (2023), USA.		Miller et al. (2016), Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Turkey and Trinidad; Sills et al. (2016), New Zealand; Whitehead and Ringrose (2021), UK.

3.1 Evidence of associations between social media use and inequitable and harmful gender norms

Endorsement of gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes

Some quantitative research points to a connection between social media and stereotyped or inequitable gender norms among male users. Scharrer and Warren (2022) examined connections between the amount of time spent on television (including streaming services), video games, and YouTube with perceptions of masculine roles and norms among a national sample of 307 adolescent boys and girls aged 13 to 18 in the US. They find that adolescents who used these forms of media more frequently tended to endorse more strongly views of masculinity that favour emotional detachment, dominance, toughness and/or avoidance of markers of femininity among both boys and girls. YouTube use, in particular, was associated with support for views of masculinity that favour emotional detachment and dominance.

A survey of 400 adolescents (14-16 years old) in southern Spain by Gil Bermejo et al. (2021) identifies significant relationships between the use of Instagram and Snapchat and sexist beliefs. US-based survey research with 101 young people and 18 and 19 also suggests that a higher frequency of social media use and exposure to sexualised images on social media is associated with the sexual objectification of women and acceptance of rape myths (Tang, 2020).[11] In a study of links between adherence to traditional masculine gender role and the likelihood of sexually objectifying women conducted with 329 undergraduate men in the US, Mikorski and Szymanski (2017) identify an association between Facebook use and making unwanted sexual advances.

Similarly, an experiment with 172 male and female participants from a large US University (median age 20.75) leads Fox et al. (2015) to conclude that interacting with sexist online content can affect sexist attitudes 'in the real world'. They assessed whether users' anonymity and their level of interactivity with sexist Twitter content affects sexist attitudes and offline behaviour. Participants were asked to compose or retweet posts incorporating a sexist hashtag (#GetBackInTheKitchen) using an account that was either anonymous or that included identifying details. Anonymous participants, both male and female, reported higher levels of hostile sexism after tweeting than non-anonymous participants. Those who drafted sexist tweets themselves also reported greater hostile sexism and ranked female job candidates as less competent in a job-hiring simulation.

Body image concerns

Another set of studies has found relationships between social media use and attitudes towards physical appearance. For young men, body image concerns may reflect pressures to conform to expectations for masculinity. For example, qualitative research on the relationship between engagement with fitness-related trends on social media and body image among young men in the UK has highlighted a desire to physically manifest traditional ideas of masculinity by looking stronger or more muscular (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020). Pressures around body image can be particularly significant for adolescents for whom their physical appearance can be an important (conscious or unconscious) way to affirm their gender identity and express this on social media (Ney, 2016; Knoll et al., 2013). Others have argued that male body image concerns may reflect ways in which social media alters – rather than asserts – traditional gender norms, increasingly exposing young men to standards that women and girls have been subjected to, disproportionately, in many Western cultures (pressure to have a perfect physical appearance) (Manago et al., 2015).

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11 Note, however, that Tang (2020) reports some challenges with the reliability of the social media use scale employed in this doctoral thesis.

Earlier research on social media use and body image focused primarily on women and girls (e.g. Meier and Gray, 2014; Tiggemann and Miller, 2010; Vandenbosch and Eggermont, 2012). More recently, several surveys have identified connections with body image for men and boys, as well as women and girls. Drawing on a sample of US college students in the Midwest of the US[12] (467 women and 348 men), Manago et al. (2015) found associations between Facebook use and objectified body consciousness (basing one's self-worth on physical appearance) for both men and women, which, in turn, predicted greater body shame and decreased sexual assertiveness. In research in the Netherlands, de Vries and colleagues have identified specific associations between social media use and body image among both teenage boys and girls in longitudinal (de Vries et al., 2016) and cross-sectional (de Vries, et al., 2019) research.

A study by Stein et al. (2021) with 228 male and female young adults aged 18 and 34 in Germany also finds significant associations between browsing Instagram's public content and problematic eating behaviours among both men and women. It also identifies some links between such social media use and body-related norms, standards and attitudes. Among female (but not male) participants, for example, Instagram browsing is associated with more biased views of the appearance of strangers (rating a set of full-body photographs of strangers as higher weight, compared to those who spend less time browsing through the platform's public content). However, the study found no relationship between Instagram browsing and individuals' satisfaction with their own body among either male or female participants.

Focusing specifically on early adolescence, Salomon and Spears-Brown (2019) assess associations between time spent on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, specific self-objectifying online behaviours (e.g. posting pictures of oneself) and body image among 142 seventh-grade students from four public middle schools in a city in the South of the US. They find that higher levels of self-objectifying social media use are associated with greater body shame in this group. This connection is mediated by an associated increase in body surveillance, such as regularly comparing one's looks to others. Among boys, however, they only find these associations for individuals who are particularly focused on others for approval. Boys who are more inclined to ignore social cues and less likely to change their behaviour because of others do not show the same connections between social media use and body concerns.

3.2 Evidence of no association or association with more equitable gender norms

In contrast to the studies reviewed in the previous section, a small body of quantitative and mixed methods research finds connections between aspects of internet and social media use and more gender equal attitudes, and some studies find no associations. These studies focus on attitudes to gender roles and gender equality. Though fewer in number (only five in total), these studies come from a wider range of countries (India, Israel, Mexico, the Netherlands and the US). What is more, several of these are longitudinal. As discussed further in Section 3.3, this kind of study provides stronger evidence of the direction of influence between social media and gender norms than cross-sectional research.

Three of the quantitative and mixed methods studies reviewed found that internet and social media use was associated with more gender equitable attitudes. Analysis of data from 12th grade students (typically aged 17 to 18) in the US collected via the 2016-2020 Monitoring the Future Survey (Turel, 2022) suggests that time spent on social media is associated with a *reduction* in sexist attitudes towards women. Turel argues that these results suggest that 'the moral panic' over the possible

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12 The authors recognise that the findings are limited by the homogeneity of the sample (primarily European-American, heterosexual students from middle to upper socioeconomic status families).

impact of these and other technologies in driving sexist attitudes is not justified. He suggests that this might imply that social media can actually help adolescents to develop more positive attitudes towards women.

Similarly, a longitudinal study by Patel et al. (2021) with adolescent boys and girls (aged 10 to 19) in the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in India finds that access to the internet or social media has a positive effect on attitudes towards gender roles, but not among younger boys. Aleon et al. (2019) arrive at a similar conclusion in their study of values among three generations in an Arab Bedouin community in Israel. They find that younger generations are more likely to support gender equality and highlight that time spent on the internet and watching television was associated with different values across generations.[13]

Two of the studies reviewed find no evidence of any association between internet and social media use and attitudes to gender equality. Manago and Pacheco (2019) find that internet use has little association with views on gender issues in a Mayan community in Mexico, having conducted research in the community before and after the installation of a communication tower, using vignettes developed through previous fieldwork. They find that people who have attended high school are more likely to use the internet and Facebook but that internet use alone does not predict views on gender independent of its association with high school attendance.

Two studies found no evidence of association between internet and social media use and attitudes to gender equality.
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13   A range of variables regarding communication technology use – including time spent on social media specifically – as a whole
      mediated the relationship between generation and value differences.

A study by van Oosten et al. (2017) examined connections between 'sexy self-representation' on social media (such as posting or viewing pictures of scantily dressed people) and overall gender role orientation among a sample of 1,467 Dutch adolescents aged 13 to 18. Investigating this relationship in three waves of longitudinal survey research at three month intervals, they find no effects on the endorsement of stereotypical gender role orientation among boys and girls.

Neither the qualitative nor the quantitative studies reviewed are necessarily comparable. They cannot, therefore, be 'added up' in a straightforward way to point to one overall conclusion on social media effects. They examine diverse measures and aspects of social media and gender norms, in different settings, and are based on different understandings of how these two sets of factors are connected (reviewed in Annex 2). As a result, they make different assumptions about how such connections can be observed and, accordingly, use different methodologies.

Studies that examine multiple measures of social media use and gender norms or attitudes often only identify associations between some of these. For example, Scharrer and Warren (2022) found that greater use of YouTube was associated with support for views of masculinity that favour emotional detachment and dominance, but not with other measures such as 'toughness' (agreement with statements such as 'If someone else starts it, a guy should be allowed to use violence to defend himself') and 'avoidance of femininity' (e.g. 'guys should play with trucks rather than dolls'). As further discussed below, Stein et al. (2021) find that only participants' tendency to browse Instagram's public content – rather than mere usage time – is related to problematic eating behaviours and biased views towards the physical appearance of strangers. This suggests that there may not be one single connection between social media and gender norms but rather multiple connections, depending on the elements of social media use and gendered attitudes in focus and the particular context. We will return to this discussion in Section 4. As highlighted in the next section, the multiple links between social media and gender norms may also run in multiple directions.

3.3 Interrogating the direction of influence between social media and gender norms

With some exceptions (e.g. Patel et al., 2021; van Oosten et al., 2017; Manago and Pacheco, 2019) the survey research reviewed is cross-sectional. As authors tend to recognise, this means that the direction of influence between social media and the outcomes measured is open to interpretation. However, cross-sectional studies tend to interpret associations as evidence of the influence of social media on gender norms, rather than as pointing to the influence of norms on social media.

In a survey of 364 14- to 30-year-olds in Luxembourg (male and female), respondents stated that social media was a significant source of their ideas of a typical man and a typical woman. However, they reported that it had less influence on them than their parents or best friends. Men and boys rated the influence of social media as considerably less significant than women and girls, possibly reflecting women's and girls' more frequent usage of social media (Melzer et al., 2019; Hale et al., 2022). These perceptions are consistent with a view of social media as influencing gender-related outcomes.

At the same time, a range of quantitative and qualitative studies with adolescents suggest these associations may arise because pre-existing gender norms may lead to different patterns of social media use among adolescents, rather than (or in addition to) patterns of social media use having an impact on gender norms. These studies include the following:

- The 2017 longitudinal study by van Oosten et al. provides clues on the sequence of developments and finds that Dutch adolescents' endorsement of stereotypical gender role orientation predicts more frequent 'sexy social media self-presentation' and exposure to others' 'sexy self-presentations' (such as posting and viewing pictures showing a lot of skin). In a cross-sectional design, this association could, mistakenly, have been interpreted as evidence that 'sexy self-presentation' on social media contributes to more stereotypical gender-role orientation.

- Findings from longitudinal research in Belgium (Rousseau et al., 2017) may point to a reinforcing spiral between body dissatisfaction and Facebook use among adolescent boys, with exposure to the content of others' profiles ('passive' Facebook use) associated with increased comparisons on Facebook and body dissatisfaction. In turn, social comparison and body dissatisfaction increases passive Facebook use.[14]

- Manago et al. (2023) suggest that traditional norms of masculinity and femininity inform why and how adolescents use social media in the first place. Drawing on a sample of 209 cisgender 9-12th grade students in northern California, they assess the effects of biological sex and identification with behaviours defined as traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' on different types of social media use (see Annex 1 for more details of methodology). Manago et al. found that students' identification with stereotypical gendered behaviour (which they term as gender ideologies) is significant in shaping some online behaviours independent of sex. For example, identification with femininity predicts students' use of social media to bond emotionally with close friends, and an association with masculinity predicts bonding over activities, regardless of biological sex. Other findings suggest that adolescents use social media in non-stereotypical ways, such as identification with 'masculinity ideology' also predicting using social media for purposes associated with girls (appearance validation, social compensation).

- Similarly, Wright (2017) assesses the effects of identification with stereotypical feminine and masculine traits on online behaviour: in this case cyber aggression perpetrated through different technologies (social-networking sites, gaming consoles, mobile phones) in a group of 233 eighth graders from two middle schools in the Midwest of the US. She finds that identification with feminine and masculine traits is associated with the use of different platforms for cyber aggression and with different types of aggression. Boy and girls with more feminine traits are more likely to engage in more 'cyber relational aggression' (spreading rumours or gossiping) through social media or mobile phones, while those with more masculine traits are more likely to engage in 'cyber relational aggression' and 'cyber verbal aggression' (insulting someone, calling others mean names, teasing someone in a mean way) through online gaming. Adolescents identifying with more masculine traits are also more likely to engage in hacking through all technologies than those reporting more feminine traits.

- The role of gender norms in shaping social media use – rather than (only) vice versa – is also reflected in at least one US-based study of the effects of gender norms on social media use among adult men. The 2019 study by Parent et al. of 402 men found that three measures of toxic masculinity – sexism, heterosexism and competitiveness – were associated with more negative online interactions, such as making negative comments or engaging with content one disagrees with. They interpret these findings as evidence that toxic masculinity can shape online communication styles. They find that high volumes of negative online interactions are, in turn, associated with depression. This suggests that, by shaping the nature of social media use, gender norms may also be a factor that influences the (potentially harmful) effects of social media rather than necessarily being a primary outcome of social media use.

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14 The authors recognise several research limitations, including short time intervals of measurement (six months) and call for further studies to confirm such effects.

These findings are consistent with the studies reviewed in Section 2.2 on differences between boys' and girls' social media use, which likely reflect the different gendered roles and expectations into which boys and girls are socialised.

Qualitative studies undertaken with adolescents (and adults)[15] add nuance to quantitative studies and reinforce the emerging conclusion that social media use and gender norms influence one another, potentially in different directions at the same time. Examples included the following:

- A range of qualitative research suggests that social media may serve to reinforce pre-existing attitudes to gender roles, rather than independently 'creating' them: studies with adolescents in France, Austria and Brazil,[16] for example, highlight how strongly pre-existing gender norms shape adolescent boys' and girls' engagement with social media. They document, for example, the level of care taken by girls to conform with existing gender norms when posting online images of themselves, constantly toeing the line between gaining approval for their attractiveness to the opposite sex and being shamed for excessively 'revealing' or 'attention-seeking' posts. Boys may be 'rewarded' for other types of content, content that proves their 'masculinity' by showing their courage (e.g. through photos of risk-taking behaviour such as drinking), strength (e.g. through photos of muscles or going to the gym) and virility (e.g. through online evidence of girlfriends or sharing nude photos sent to them by girls with peers).[17]

  Some studies also suggest that boys can express feelings of anger but not vulnerability (much less online) (Ney 2016; Knoll et al., 2013; Forsman, 2017). Online feedback – particularly from their peers – whether through 'likes' or bullying, can then further increase pressure to conform to these norms. Peers may enforce gender norms particularly harshly through online spaces, allowing users to quickly learn what is desirable (Göbbels, 2015; Knoll et al., 2013; Ney 2016; Couchot-Schiex and Richard, 2021). This stems from a certain disinhibition often observed in online spaces as a result of features such as anonymity and the inability to observe others' physical reaction (as further discussed in Section 4.3).
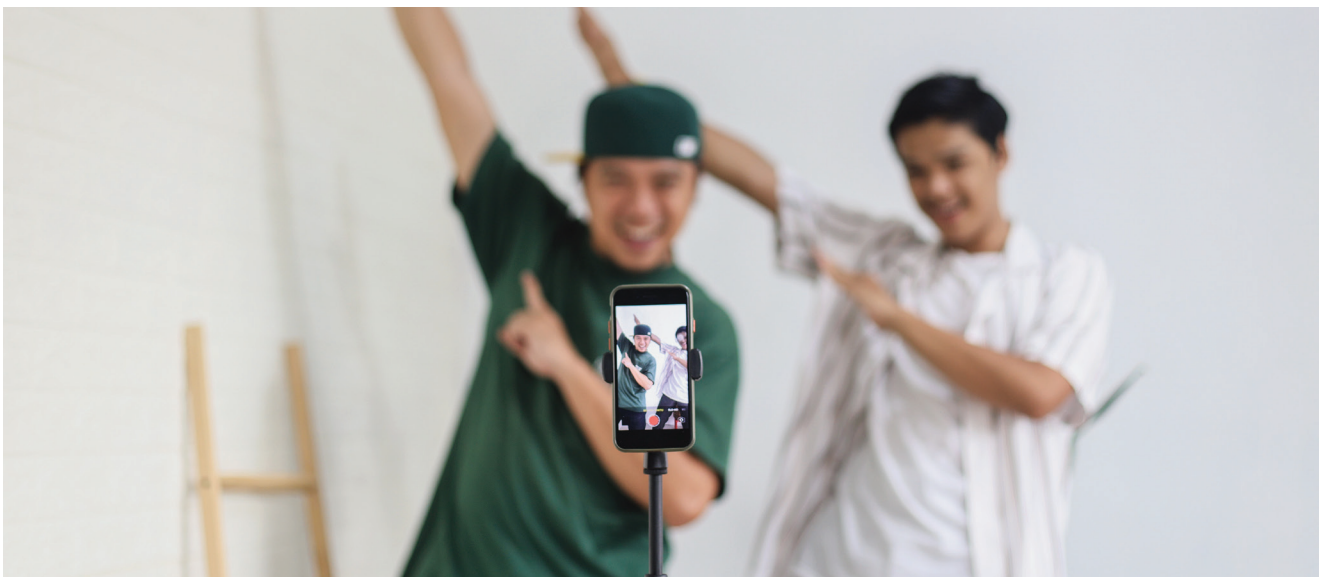
Boys may be 'rewarded' for showing their 'masculinity' on social media e.g. demonstrating courage, strength or virility.
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15 Such as the ethnographic study of social media use in Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy and Trinidad by Miller et al. (2016).

16 France: Couchot-Schiex (2017); Couchot-Schiex and Richard (2021); Rsaissi and Couchot-Schiex (2021). Austria: Ney (2016); Knoll et al. (2013). Brazil: Barbovschi et al. (2017)

17 e.g. Barbovschi et al. (2017); Ney (2016); Knoll et al. (2013); Balleys (2017a); O'Rourke and Haslop (2023).

- Qualitative studies also show the diversity of spaces and content adolescents encounter online. They often find that young people perceive social media as offering both spaces that reify or escalate discriminatory gender norms *and* opportunities to resist and challenge these, pointing to the potentially diverse effects of social media. For example, in interviews with 17 young people (primarily female) in New Zealand who are critical of rape culture, Sills et al. (2016) find that participants see social media as both perpetuating rape culture and offering online spaces that provide inspiration, education and solidarity to combat attitudes that endorse violence against women and girls (Sills et al., 2016).

  Based on interviews and social media diaries with a group of Black British teenage boys (aged 16 and 17) from a London secondary school, Whitehead and Ringrose (2021) likewise highlight that memes serve as both vehicles of misogyny and opportunities for solidarity and resistance in the face of prevalent expectations for masculinity – at times within the same image (with the same meme mocking male height expectations while also objectifying women, for example). In ethnographic research across diverse field sites in Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Turkey and Trinidad, Miller et al. (2016) similarly find that social media has offered spaces that reify existing gender norms as well as safe spaces to experiment with more diverse ways of being a man.

- Finally, as further discussed in Section 4, qualitative research suggests that even the same content may have diverse effects, showing that young people perceive and interpret it differently depending on their pre-existing views on gender and other attitudes. Based on group interviews with 46 9-12 year-old children in Sweden, Martínez and Olsson (2019) suggest that even younger children and adolescents may already interpret online content through existing and potentially differing perceptions of gender norms and roles. Interviews with 25 young men (aged 18 to 25) in the UK on their use of fitness-related trends/hashtags suggest that those already struggling with body image issues are more eager to emulate social media images of male bodies and tend to engage more deeply with this content, while those with a better body image see it more critically (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020). This suggests that pre-existing self-perceptions and attitudes towards one's physical appearance may shape engagement with – and the effects of exposure to – objectifying content, rather than (only) the reverse.[18]

In sum, the available evidence on the influence of social media on gender norms among adolescent boys and young men is mixed. Though some quantitative (or mixed methods) studies explore the direction of influence, not all do, and it is important to bear this in mind when considering the body of evidence. Qualitative studies, in particular, point to influences running in both directions and potentially being both positive and negative.

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18 Cross-sectional evidence of associations between social media use and male body image (e.g. Manago et al., 2015; Stein et al., 2021; Salomon and Spears-Brown, 2019) could also be interpreted as body image, shaping how social media is used.

# 4. What influences the effects of social media on gender norms?

> **Key take-aways**
>
> - Emerging research suggests that the ways in which social media may influence gender norms among users depend on how social media is used, who uses is and in what context. Initial studies suggest that relevant factors can include the amount of time spent on social media; the type of content consumed (or produced); the passivity or activeness of use; who users interact with; as well as individual personality and attitudes, including pre-existing views on gender. These factors, in turn, partially reflect users' wider social environments, which are considered in relatively few studies.
>
> - Platforms that allow users to express themselves more privately and/or anonymously and that enable temporary content appear to provide space for adolescents to express themselves more freely. Adolescents may use such spaces to express themselves in less gender-conforming ways and for more exploratory self-expression. Yet the same features can also allow users to express highly discriminatory attitudes and behaviours while avoiding retaliation.
>
> - While the role of algorithms in suggesting content similar to that viewed previously is increasingly acknowledged, insufficient attention is paid to other aspects of the social media business model. In particular, there has been little focus on how incentives to encourage continued attention (and exposure to advertising) are structured into both the operation of algorithms and features that provide social reward (e.g. likes). The lack of effective content moderation is starting to be recognised as a key factor in the spread of misogynistic online content.

Section 3 presented evidence suggesting that the relationship between social media use and gender norms flows in both directions and can potentially both reify and challenge discriminatory gender norms. This section synthesises insights on the factors that influence this relationship and that may contribute to diverse outcomes. Emerging research suggests that the effects of social media on gender norms are likely to vary depending on how social media is used, who uses it and in what context. While research in this area is at an early stage and further work is needed to ascertain the relevance of intervening factors in different contexts, Figure 1 visualises some key factors that initial studies have found to shape effects of social media on gender norms. It also draws on wider scholarship on information systems and social media.[19]

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19 This figure was co-developed with Stephanie Diepeveen and draws on her wider work on information systems and social media, summarised in Diepeveen (2021, 2022).

Figure 1 Factors that may shape the influence of social media use on gender-related norms among adolescent boys
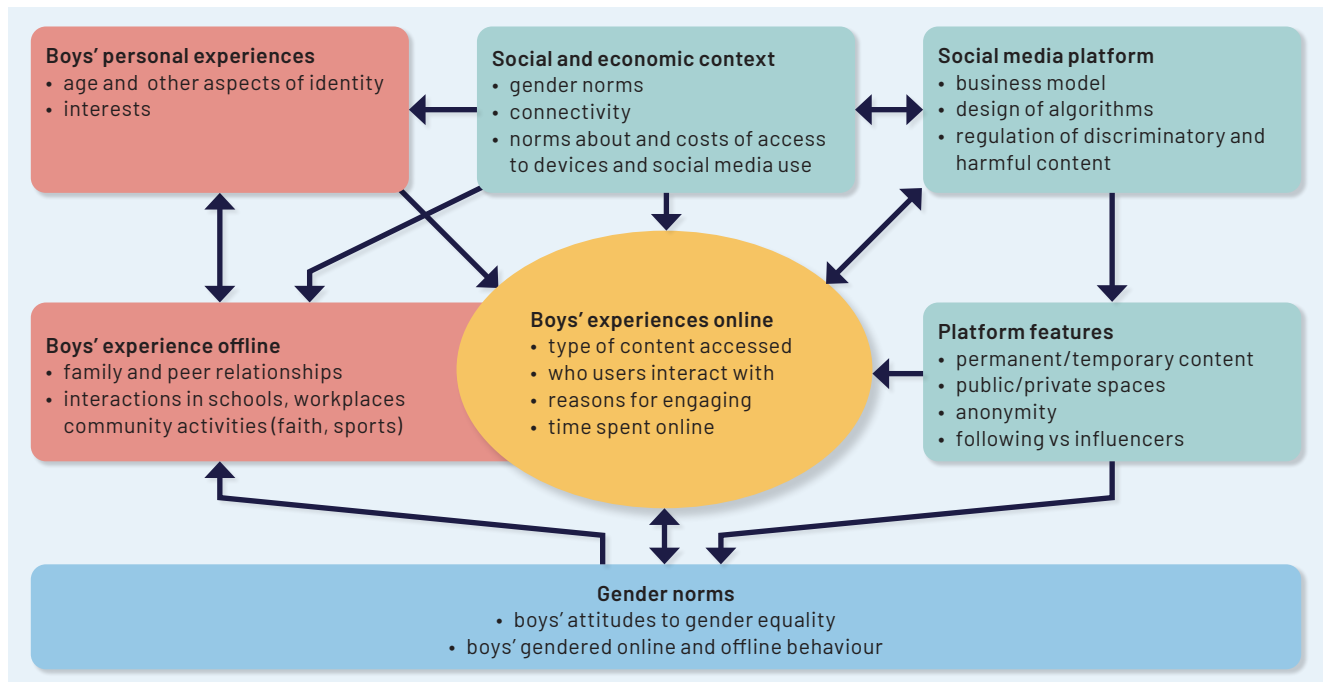
This section discusses five of these elements: the extent of social media use; the type of content encountered; platform features; boys' family and wider social context; and the role of platform design and business model.

4.1 Extent of social media use

A common theoretical perspective on the effects of media exposure that studies have recently applied to social media (cultivation theory, further discussed in Annex 2), suggests that effects on social norms are incremental and cumulative. In this perspective, individuals who spend more time exposed to media will gradually become more inclined to see the 'real world' in terms of what they see in the media. The effects, therefore, depend on repeated and significant media exposure over time.

Four of the quantitative studies reviewed focused exclusively on the quantity of social media use, sometimes generalising around 'impact' on adolescents on this basis. At their simplest, these studies compare use and non-use, including the longitudinal study by Patel et al. (2021) on the various factors influencing gender norms in two states in India. This finds an association between internet and social media use and more progressive views of gender roles for all groups, with the exception of younger boys.

In their study with Dutch adolescents, de Vries et al. (2016) assess connections between body dissatisfaction and self-reported frequency of use of the platform *Hyves.nl* in the past 6 months (on a scale from never to always). They find that their measure of more frequent social network site use predicted increased body dissatisfaction among both boys and girls.[20] In their studies with adolescents in the US, Scharrer and Warren (2022) and Turel (2022) assess the effects of time spent

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20 Similarly, de Vries et al. (2019) find that adolescents who use social media more frequently are more dissatisfied with their bodies. However, this is based on averaging the frequency of certain kinds of social media behaviours (passive, active and public use), rather than overall time spent on social media.

on YouTube (hours per each day of the week) and overall 'social media' (hours per week on a scale from none to 40 or more), respectively, on sexist or stereotyped attitudes. They come to different conclusions: Scharrer and Warren (2022) find associations between increased usage time and agreement with some traditional gender norms (Scharrer and Warren, 2022). By contrast Turel (2022) finds that increased time online is associated with a reduction in sexist attitudes, and on this basis argues that the 'moral panic' over the impact of different technologies may be misplaced.

Other studies, however, suggest that indicators of quantity may be insufficient to support this conclusion. Turel (2022) likewise recognises that his study's focus on overall time spent on all social media content – and not just 'sexist' content – is a limitation. The studies discussed in the next two sections focus on different types of social media use, often highlighting that how social media is used is as (or more) important than how much it is used.

4.2 Type of content and nature of interaction

As noted by Turel (2022), the effects of social media use may depend on the nature of content that individual users encounter. Online content can be both stereotyped and counter-stereotypical, and online spaces can both expose gender non-conforming individuals to harassment and offer safe spaces for more diverse self-expression. Messages can range from outright misogyny, as in much of the manosphere, to the celebration of content that challenges gender stereotypes or binary views of gender. In between, much content implicitly normalises conventional gender norms, for example, through presentation of male and female bodies or images of male and female alcohol consumption and related posts (e.g. Lyons and Gough, 2017; Vranken et al., 2023). The format through which gendered messages are shared also varies, including digital images, videos and associated user discussions; memes; hashtags; and content shared by everyday users, influencers or public figures.[21] These different formats may influence users in different ways.

The type of content popularised by misogynistic influencers has prompted particular concerns about the potential effects on adolescent boys. Insights from research on the reception of Andrew Tate that were available at the time of writing are summarised in Box 1.[22]

Box 1 Adolescent boys' perspectives on Andrew Tate and the use of incel fora

As the data quoted in the introduction to this report show, the vast majority of adolescent boys in the UK and Australia are aware of Andrew Tate. Media reports from Pakistan, India and Brazil note his appeal well beyond these Anglophone contexts (Kesvani, 2023).[23] However, available studies (including two quantitative studies from the UK and Australia) also show that the proportion of boys who agree with Andrew Tate's views on women is much smaller than the numbers who access his content. In a study in the UK, 17% of boys aged 6 to 15 reported having a positive opinion of Andrew Tate, rising to 23% among those aged 13 to 15. Also, 12% of those aged 6 to 15 reported agreeing with Tate's views on women, compared to 17% for his views on masculinity and what it means to be a man, and 20% for his views on work and success. By contrast, 31% of those aged 6 to 15 and 56% of those aged 13 to 15 reported disagreeing with his views on women.[24]

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21 As highlighted by analyses of different types of gendered content, such as: Foster and Baker (2022), Maddocks and Parfaite (2023), Whitehead and Ringrose (2021), Pradhan (2022), Gambert and Linné (2018), Parks et al. (2022), Bredikhina and Giard (2022), Tang et al. (2021).

22 Further research on adolescents' perspectives on Andrew Tate is forthcoming, such as Haslop et al. (2024).

23 Various media articles also comment on Tate's conversion to Islam in 2022, with divided opinions about the sincerity of this conversion and its implications.

24 Most of the rest of the boys interviewed were unaware of his views rather than supporting them.

> **'I relate to the fact that he is able to inspire young individuals around the world to stand up for themselves and improve themselves but I don't resonate with his toxic, sexist, and misogynistic side of conversation."**
> Participant in Man Cave (2023) research, Australia

Research in Australia with 1374 boys who had participated in school-based mental health workshops found that 25% saw Tate as a role model, while 44% did not, and 35% were neutral. This study found that for boys who found him relatable (35%) or a role model, it was his views on hard work and success that they most agreed with. However, aspects of his 'traditional' masculinity were also appealing, such as being brave, confident and 'defending men'. Those who did not see him as a role model or as relatable often referred to his views on women, his arrogance and the perception that he exploits others for financial gain (Man Cave, 2023). The study also found that many respondents appreciated aspects of his approach – largely those related to self-reliance – while rejecting his misogynistic views.

Data on adolescents' use of incel forums are more limited. A study by CCDH Quant Lab. (the Center for Countering Digital Hate), found that 83% of users in the incel forums they studied were over 18, implying that 17% were under 18, and that these boys where some of the most active contributors (CCDH Quant Lab., 2022). Although incel forums are supposed not to allow participants under 15, participants' ages cannot be verified. The CCDH study found that 16% of posts include misogynistic slurs (equating to one every 4 minutes), alongside 5% racist and 3% homophobic content. Regehr et al.'s (2024) study suggests that misogynistic influencers have effectively brought incel ideology into the mainstream of online content. They warn that 'content that was once only found in dark corners of the internet, relegated to subversive platforms like 8chan, or specific "alt" servers on Discord, [is] now algorithmically offered and circulated on popular teen platforms like TikTok' (p7). Thus even if relatively few adolescents are using self-defined incel forums, these ideas are now being circulated and normalised among a much wider set of young people.

Some recent commentary has started to raise questions about the implications of entertainment content oriented to adolescent boys that is largely male-dominated and that features very few women (other than as sexual partners or potential dates). This includes prank-focused content, and much sports- and gaming-focused content, largely disseminated through YouTube. Where sexist banter takes place, this may be normalising gender stereotypes or harassment, even if any girls or women on screen appear to find the content funny (Mance, 2023). However, as Mance also points out, popular YouTubers show a wider set of ways of being a man than, for example, the 'lads' magazines of previous decades, suggesting that influences may be multi-faceted. These conclusions are backed up by several studies of YouTube and TikTok, as follows.

- An analysis of 115 video-blogs by some of the UK's most popular YouTubers at the time by Morris and Anderson (2015) found that they demonstrated a more inclusive form of being masculine than previous generations, rejecting homophobia, misogyny and aggression.

- Foster and Baker (2022) analysed the visual content of 205 TikTok videos of the platform's 43 most-followed male content creators and found that these creators both challenged and reinforced traditional ideas of masculinity. For example, they celebrated non-conforming expressions of masculinity such as dancing and wearing jewellery, as well as reinforcing the significance of male muscularity and 'sexual bravado' – at times simultaneously and within the same video.

- Analyses of popular German YouTube channels note that many of these propagate gender stereotypes, including traditional ways of 'being a man'. To some extent, this occurs through the cross-posting of 'traditional' media content, such as advertising, music videos and parts of films and television shows – importing their stereotypes to social media. At the same time, YouTube also offers more diverse role models, including authentic role models for LGBTQI+ youth, which are often missing in traditional media (Döring, 2015, 2019; Frühbrodt and Floren, 2019).

Literature on video games suggests that the precise nature of the content consumed may play a significant role in shaping its effects. While findings on the influence of video games on sexist attitudes are mixed overall, several studies suggest that those with violent sexist content – but not other types of games – may have some impact on sexist attitudes (e.g. Blackburn and Scharrer, 2019; Stermer and Burkley, 2015; Gabbiadini et al., 2016; LaCroix et al., 2018).

A few of the studies reviewed probed the effects of specific types of social media content. Fox et al. (2015) assess the specific impact of sexist engagement on Twitter and find that actively posting sexist content is associated with adopting more sexist attitudes. Scharrer and Warren (2022), in turn, test for the impacts of more (and less) violent YouTube content on adolescents' endorsement of attitudes associated with 'traditional masculinity', but do not find a difference. Stein et al. (2021) find that a stronger tendency to browse public content, rather than the amount of time spent on Instagram, predicts body image concerns (including biased views on the physical appearance of strangers and more disordered eating behaviour). They suggest that users who spend a lot of time on social media, but who engage mostly with their own profiles or with content posted by their friends, may be more protected from the body-related content and trends circulating on Instagram. They conclude that:

> 'our study indicated that it might be much less important *how often* people use social media than *what* they use it for. …. future interventions aimed at improving young people's body image might be more successful if they address the way social media are used, other than rallying against them altogether.' (p94).

As findings by Stein et al. (2021) begin to suggest, the way in which users interact with social media content may also affect the influence of social media on users, not least by shaping the content to which they are predominantly exposed. Rousseau et al. (2017) also suggest that 'passive' use (browsing through other people's content) may have a particular influence on body image by leading to increased comparisons with others.

Fox et al. (2015) suggest that different levels of interaction with problematic content may have different effects. In particular, they test for the effects of posting sexist content on Twitter oneself, as opposed to exposure to content provided by others. As noted in Section 4.1 they identify different effects on post-experiment sexist attitudes, depending on whether content is re-tweeted or composed by participants themselves. They also suggest that participants who have more control over a message may also experience more agency and that this stronger agency may, in turn, predict increased influence on cognitions, attitudes and behaviours.

Several studies on links between video games and (gender-related) attitudes and behaviours support this idea, suggesting that the interactivity involved in gaming may lead to stronger effects on attitudes and behaviours than the passive consumption of television. In addition, playing a video game oneself may have more impact than watching someone else play it, and a high level of 'immersion' in the game environment seems to predict stronger associations with gender-related attitudes (e.g. Bègue et al., 2017; Polman et al., 2008; LaCroix et al., 2018).

4.3 Platforms' features

Several studies suggest that different platforms may have different roles and impacts, reflecting their varied features.

Primarily visual content. A distinction can be made between platforms that offer either primarily written or visual content, although few of the studies reviewed make specific comparisons between the two. Gil Bermejo et al. (2021) find that the use of Instagram and Snapchat – both image-based platforms – has a particularly strong association with sexism among adolescents in their study in Spain. They note that these results may signal the particularly powerful influence of images. This idea is supported by psychological research suggesting that visual content is often more engaging (Chaiken and Eagly, 1976; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Washington and Marcus, 2022). The sharing of visual content may also have a distinctive role in shaping attitudes related to male and female physical bodies, including by encouraging users to see themselves from the 'outside' – with the potential to contribute to self-objectification. Supporting these ideas, early research on the impact of Facebook found that the platform had a particular influence on body image among people who used its photo-related features (Kim and Chock, 2015; Meier and Gray, 2014; Stein et al., 2021).

Privacy and anonymity. Based on their ethnographic studies, Miller et al. (2016) suggest that the relative privacy of social media platforms may also affect how they influence gender norms. Their research in diverse locations across eight countries indicates that the norms around what is posted on public-facing social media platforms, such as Facebook, are often 'hyper-conservative', and may provide portrayals of reality that are more gender-conservative than life offline. The high degree of community surveillance to which content on these platforms is subjected creates incentives for individuals to demonstrate their conformity with cultural norms, including those related to gender. More private platforms may be more likely to provide safe spaces for resistance.

In recent qualitative research, German adolescents (aged 12 to 15) note that anonymous profiles can be used to make statements that their peer group may not approve of and some adolescents use several profiles, both public and anonymous, for different purposes (Bamberger et al., 2023a, 2023b). Research with adolescent boys aged 16-17 in Sweden suggests that such online anonymity gives them opportunities to express their emotions, resisting the 'real life' pressure to act like a 'tough guy' (Randell et al., 2016).

While anonymity may provide opportunities to resist stereotypes it can also increase space to post sexist content without the risk of sanctions from the community. In their experiment with participants from a large US university, Fox et al. (2015) find that opportunities for individual users to post anonymously may increase the impact of sexist content on those who post it. Citing the work of Suler (2004) on the online disinhibition effect[25] – whereby users act online in ways in which they are unlikely to behave 'offline' – Fox et al. argue that any differences may be the result of anonymity serving to increase disinhibition. They note that, unlike other sites such as Facebook, Twitter does not enforce a real-name clause in its user agreements, which could allow more anonymous posting.

Anonymity does not only reflect the structural features of platforms: it may also reflect the presence or absence of different user groups. Posts on platforms such as Facebook may be seen by adult family and community members, which may encourage conformity with established norms (Miller et al., 2016). While some platforms (such as Facebook) are increasingly dominated by older adults, others, such as TikTok are spaces where adolescents and younger people can socialise without

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25 This effect is promoted by five elements that Fox et al. (2015) see as relevant to online sexism: invisibility (the inability to physically observe others' reactions); asynchronicity (the lack of immediate feedback may further reduce the perceive impact of such behaviours); minimisation of authority (lack of monitoring and accountability for online behaviour); dissociative anonymity (ability to distance online actions form the physical self); and dissociative imagination (conceptualising the online world as a distinct environment).

'supervision' by older generations. This offers the potential for greater socialisation with peers, but also opportunities to experiment with more diverse self-presentation and views (Waechter, 2021; Waechter and Meschik, 2023).

As noted by Barsigian et al. (2023), different user groups and what different platforms allow users to do can contribute to the development of different sub-cultures on individual platforms. Among a group of LGBTQI+ adolescents aged 16 to 19 in the US in the 2023 study by Barsigian et al., Tumblr, for example, was perceived as queer friendly and as a key site for the creation of queer communities,[26] while Facebook was perceived to be dominated by more traditional gender narratives. A combination of the presence of older family members and its real-name policy increased the likelihood that LGBTQI+ adolescents would self-censor or disengage from the platform.

Permanence of content. As noted earlier, studies find that many adolescents experience high levels of peer pressure to conform to gender norms when posting content online (e.g. Couchot-Schiex, 2017; Couchot-Schiex and Richard, 2021). The relative permanence of content posted online may increase this pressure. This permanence, however, can vary depending on platform functions and how adolescents choose to use them. In qualitative research, some adolescents in Germany (aged 12 to 15) report that they alleviate peer pressure to provide 'perfect' self-representations by posting content via the 'story' function (with posts only visible for 24 hours) (Bamberger et al., 2023a, 2023b). Interviews with Black teenagers in South London suggest that Snapchat's story function also facilitates the sharing of risk-taking and aggressive behaviours associated with conventional masculinity – in this case violence linked to gang activities. Its disappearing content can help those responsible avoid accountability (Whitehead and Ringrose, 2021).

4.4 Individuals' susceptibility to social media influence

Some research suggests a significant 'individualisation' of social media use, with patterns of social media use that are diverse even among fairly homogenous groups. For example, research by Waechter (2021) shows that not even the closest teenage friends always use the same applications (see also Jochim and Gebel, 2022). Nor do they necessarily see the same content (See Section 4.5 for further discussion on the role of social media algorithms in suggesting content based on an individuals' previous viewing). If, as discussed, in Sections 4.2 and 4.3 above, engaging with different applications and content may have different effects, this suggests that the impacts of social media use could be diverse even among relatively homogenous groups of adolescents.

While quantitative research can often control only for a limited number of background characteristics, several quantitative and qualitative studies indicate that the effects of social media use may also vary with individual background characteristics that influence susceptibility to online messages. As noted, some individuals may be more vulnerable to the same influences than others. This raises further questions about attempts to identify any general impact of social media content, including on adolescents.

Age and identity development. A number of studies suggest that age may play a role, although the findings are mixed. Several authors suggest that younger age groups may be more susceptible to social media influences as their sense of self is less solidified. For example, in focus groups with adolescents (aged 11 to 17) in São Paulo, Brazil, Barbovschi et al. (2017) observe that younger age groups (those aged 11 to 14) show a more intense preoccupation with obtaining peer validation through social media (likes and followers) than older adolescents. The authors attribute this to the particular life stage of these adolescents in terms of establishing their identity and peer connections.

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26 Diepeveen (2022) discusses in more detail how various features of Tumbr have led to it operating as a safe space for some LGBTQI+ users.

In their 2017 study, van Oosten et al. suggests that one reason why they do not find that 'sexy self-representation' on social media has any influence on ideas of gender roles among Dutch adolescents could be that these roles are already established among the adolescents aged 13 to 18 in their sample. They call, therefore, for further research with younger age groups (e.g. those aged 11 to 13). By contrast, Patel et al. (2021) find that social media or internet use reduces stereotyped perceptions of gender roles among all groups except younger boys in their study in India. However, they do not offer possible explanations for this finding.

Qualitative research with a small group of college students in the US (Potts, 2017) suggests that the relationship between social media and masculine identity development may evolve as students move through their college experience. While expectations associated with masculinity are shaped most strongly by their wider social surroundings and mass media when they arrive at university, the first year of college marks an opportunity to 'reinvent' their social identities, as well as intensify their social media activity to make new connections on campus. This confluence may, in turn, intensify the potential impact of their digital lives on their identity development. These results suggest that there may be individual points in the lives of adolescent boys and young men where social media plays a stronger role.

Pre-existing attitudes. Several studies point to the role of pre-existing attitudes in shaping effects. Similarly to Barbovschi et al. (2017), Salomon and Spears-Brown (2019) highlight the significance of one's relative focus on others for approval, but note that this may vary between individuals regardless of their age group. As discussed above, in their sample of students in a town in the South of the US, they find that higher levels of self-objectifying social media use are associated with greater body shame via body surveillance only among those boys who are particularly focused on others for approval. They do not find such associations among boys who are less likely to change their behaviour because of others. They note the need for future research to 'control' for other dispositional factors that may increase susceptibility to social media influences.

As noted in Section 3.1, qualitative research on social media and male body image by Chatzopoulou et al. (2020) suggests that those already struggling with body image are more susceptible to social media messaging, pointing to possible mutual reinforcement effects for this group. Immersing herself in the deeply misogynistic websites and fora of the incel community, Bates (2020) recognises that certain groups of men and boys may be particularly vulnerable to this content, including those searching for a sense of belonging and struggling to live up to traditional expectations of masculine success in the 'real world'. An initial 'vulnerability' to such views may then be reinforced and radicalised by engagement with a community of like-minded users online, its brutally sexist viewpoints and the ways in which social media algorithms push ever more intensely misogynistic content towards a user who has shown an initial interest.

A study based on group discussions with adolescents in Germany suggests that teenagers may be particularly attracted to the content of influencers with whom they perceive commonalities, such as sex, hobbies or geographical location (Bamberger et al., 2022). Similarly, research on YouTube finds that influencers often share features with the adolescents who follow them (such as age, language, culture) (Pérez-Torres et al., 2018, drawing on Westenberg, 2016). This aligns with the findings of previous research on video games and television, which suggest that the 'resonance' of content may play a role: content has a stronger effect on users' attitudes where it is close to their lived realities and where they identify with what they are seeing (e.g. Morgan et al., 2015; Gabbiadini et al., 2016).

As indicated in Section 4.4, several qualitative studies also suggest that perceptions of (gendered) content may vary significantly from one person to another depending on their pre-existing attitudes to gender roles. Examples include the following:

- Maddocks and Parfaite (2023) analyse comments on the viral 'Watch me pretend to punch my girlfriend' trend on TikTok. In these videos, adolescent boys or young men pretend to punch their girlfriends, film their girlfriends' reaction and then post it on the platform. Meant to be humorous, they are framed as pranks. Maddocks and Parfaite find diverse reactions to this deeply misogynistic content. Comments from some viewers appeared to echo misogynistic sentiments, finding the video funny, expressing outrage when women fight back, or insulting men perceived as 'weak' often in gendered and racialised ways (comparing them to 'white women', for example). Other viewers, however, express their outrage at this violence, welcome the signs of 'female empowerment' they see in women fighting back, or use this online space as an opportunity to reflect on or disclose dating violence.

- Based on group interviews with 46 children aged 9 to 12 in Sweden, Martínez and Olsson (2019) suggest that pre-adolescent children and young adolescents may already interpret online content through existing and potentially differing perceptions of gender norms and roles. They showed children a video of a then 13-year-old female YouTuber (Misslisibell) who teaches her viewers how to do 'pin-up' make-up. In response, children in the study engaged in a highly normative discussion around appropriate behaviour for a girl her age and expressed clear differences in opinion. Some girls defended the young influencer and highlighted her competence as a young girl, make-up artist and media producer. However, other girls and all boys stressed the inappropriateness of her behaviour for a girl of her age (such as wearing make-up on an ordinary day) and her manifest incompetence in making judgements.

- Research with groups of adolescents aged 10 to 16 year olds in Germany also suggests that they interpret gendered content (including more diverse representations of gender identities) through pre-existing attitudes, including a binary understanding of gender (Jochim and Gebel, 2022).

- Scharrer et al. (2023) identify diverse views among 6th graders in the US in the context of a critical media literacy programme. As part of this work, they asked 43 students (boys and girls) to comment on their general perceptions of gender portrayals on YouTube as a homework assignment and received mixed responses. Boys were less likely to perceive any gendered content, finding the question about gender in YouTube rather irrelevant.

Taken together, these studies suggest that social media may be more likely to reinforce and strengthen existing attitudes than to independently create or radically transform them.

4.5 Social and cultural context

Children and adolescents receive messages on gender norms and relations from many sources, including parents, peers, school, religious institutions, and traditional media among others. With some exceptions, however, (e.g. Patel et al., 2021; Melzer et al., 2019; Manago and Pacheco, 2019), the quantitative research reviewed often focuses on the effects of social media in relative isolation, without considering the wider individual, community and societal factors that shape both gender norms and how an individual responds to social media messaging.[27] This is a challenge both for the reliability of results and for the honing of policies and interventions.

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27 Scharrer and Warren (2022), for example, recognise that their inability to hold constant other factors that may impact gender norms is a limitation of their study.

One exception comes from a study of young people aged 15-25 in urban Mozambique, which compared the relative importance of internet use, the number of social media accounts young people used, and wider influences – such as the level of education they had achieved, their employment and family status (e.g. whether married, living with parents, etc.) – on gender norms among this group. The study found that although there was a positive relationship between internet use and gender equitable attitudes (a relationship that was stronger for young men with several social media accounts), the association between their attitudes and the level of education completed was much stronger (Selwaness and Marcus, 2023).

Research with adolescent boys in the Netherlands (de Vries et al., 2019) suggests that social environment factors play a role in shaping individuals' susceptibility to gendered messaging on social media. Among a (convenience) sample of 440 adolescents aged 12 to 19 (median age 14.9), the link between social media use and body dissatisfaction was attenuated by positive mother–adolescent relationships: social media use was associated with less body dissatisfaction among adolescents reporting more positive relationships with their mothers. Relationships with fathers did not show the same association. In their study, de Vries et al. recognise that this finding may be culturally specific – reflecting the role of mothers in raising children – and that the directions of influence are open to interpretation. Nevertheless, they conclude that not all adolescents are equally susceptible to the influence of social media and that strengthening family relationships, particularly with mothers, may improve their resilience.

Based on a review of literature from different regions, Manago and McKenzie (2022) argue that while digital media is a part of adolescents' lives almost everywhere, the extent to which it is used and how it is used are 'anything but universal' (p162). Research by Manago and Pacheco (2019) in a Maya community in Mexico, for example, highlights that technology is perceived not only as undermining but also as reinforcing family relationships, with young people using social media to remain connected with relatives. Manago and McKenzie (2022) suggest that this demonstrates the significance of existing, traditional and collectivist values in shaping young people's use of digital media in this context.

Miller et al. (2016), highlight the role of pre-existing gender norms in a particular setting in influencing the opportunities that social media use enables. They found, for example, that the use of social media has increased the visibility of LGBTQI+ communities in the public sphere in Brazil. However, more restrictive gender norms did not allow for this in South-East Turkey, where social media has created new private spaces for men to meet other men.

This brief summary of evidence on the importance of social context in shaping social media use and its effects emphasises the importance of research from outside of Europe and the United States and with more diverse populations within these countries. Findings from this set of countries may have limited applicability elsewhere and more context-specific research is needed.

4.5 The 'backend' of social media platforms

Social media is often portrayed as an independent force to which users are subjected (Schmeichel et al., 2018). While the scope of any individual study is necessarily limited, the overall field of analysis of adolescents' social media use pays relatively little attention to the role of platform architecture or to the interests it serves. This risks obscuring the ways in which platforms are designed to maximise revenue by capturing and maintaining attention through reward structures such as likes, followers and retweets, and maximising exposure to advertising. The business model that underlies social media platforms means that they often have a financial incentive to allow content that will increase the amount of time spent online (Mance, 2023), which often reinforces existing norms or is deliberately provocative. Their financial incentives also shape the extent to which they offer settings

and options that can more indirectly affect opportunities to challenge or reinforce discriminatory gender norms online, such as anonymity and privacy settings (see Section 4.3).

Social media platforms rely on algorithms to provide users with individualised online spaces, presenting and boosting specific content based on each user's (perceived) interests. Such algorithms tend to suggest more and more content perceived to align with users' preferences, in ways that can reinforce and radicalise existing attitudes and perceptions. The extent to which these algorithms reflect and replicate gender and racial biases is increasingly clear (Diepeveen, 2022). Using fake accounts identified as boys aged 9 and 14, a recent study finds that YouTube provides young boys watching video games on its platform with a string of recommendations for videos about guns and gun violence – with more and more such content being pushed to them once they begin to watch it (Tech Transparency Project, 2023; Hern, 2023). A study of TikTok conducted in 2023 found that after only five days of usage, there was a fourfold increase in the level of misogynistic content being suggested on the "For You" page of an individual's account. The research also found that the algorithm privileges more extreme material, and that through increased usage, users were gradually exposed to more misogynistic ideologies, largely through soft or humorous content (including memes) (Regehr et al., 2024).

> 'the algorithm … will keep serving up Tate videos, and maybe you will start agreeing with them. The influencers know that provocation boosts numbers. The algorithm pushes boys to similar, and often more extreme, content' (Mance, 2023).

This suggests that platform design may have an important but under-appreciated influence in shaping use patterns, the content some adolescents access, and the gendered norms they encounter online. Technology companies have generally developed community standards that specify rules concerning acceptable and unacceptable content. However, enforcement is often weak (Soundararajan et al., 2019). A report on the incelosphere criticises YouTube, in particular, for its poor enforcement of community standards and slow response to reported problems (CCDH Quant Lab., 2022). Similarly, many of the gun violence videos pushed by YouTube towards accounts identified as young boys in the above study by the Tech Transparency Project (2023) violated YouTube's own policies.

Qualitative research points to teenagers' considerable agency and creativity in navigating social media platforms, opening several profiles with different anonymity settings, avoiding permanent posts or even attempting to influence the algorithms that suggest content on their timeline. However, this agency is constrained by the options available on social media platforms and some research suggests that adolescents are more likely to consume content that is promoted on their timelines through algorithms, rather than running active searches for new content (Bamberger et al., 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

5. Conclusions

This review has set out to synthesise insights from academic and grey literature that examines how social media use influences norms of masculinity among adolescent boys, and in particular, whether social media use is associated with more sexist gender norms and attitudes.

Overall, the following conclusions have emerged from this review.

1. **Attempts to identify any 'general' impacts of social media use on gender norms among adolescent boys are asking the wrong question**. Social media comprises many platforms, which adolescents use in different ways at different times. Any effects of use are likely to differ depending on factors such as the platforms used, the type and nature of content accessed, and the amount of time spent on social media. They are also likely to vary considerably from one context to another and between different individuals.

2. **Few studies have focused specifically on the effects of social media use on gender norms or masculinity among adolescent boys:** more have analysed the gendered nature of online content. Academic research on the impacts on gender norms has largely examined the effects on sexist attitudes or attitudes to body image, rather than overall ideas of what it means to be a boy or man (masculinity). The time lag between the growing awareness of a phenomenon, research and publication means that there is a lack of published research on the impact of exposure to misogynistic influencers.

3. **The existing body of research on the impacts of social media use on gender norms among adolescent boys and young men is not cohesive, and conclusions are not necessarily generalisable**. The studies reviewed use diverse measures both of social media use and aspects of gender norms. This means that results are not always comparable and cannot be 'added up' in a straightforward way to point to an overall conclusion on effects. The vast majority (80%) of the empirical studies reviewed that focused on specific countries were undertaken in Europe and the US, largely with relatively homogenous populations, and may not be widely generalisable. For all of these reasons, the studies reviewed do not provide a comprehensive evidence base to address increasingly pressing policy concerns about the influence of misogynistic online content on gender norms among adolescent boys. Where possible, this report has attempted to tease out the implications of the studies reviewed, and highlights the areas where caution is needed in doing so.

4. **Some of the studies reviewed do suggest that there is cause for concern**. Studies show that misogynistic content is widely available to teenagers and that harmful content is not always removed. Five quantitative studies of the impacts of social media on gender norms and attitudes found aspects of social media use to be associated with some aspects of sexist attitudes and six found that social media use is associated with certain body image concerns, which can reflect a desire to conform to stereotyped gender norms. Evidence of associations cannot simply be interpreted as influence of social media on gender norm and studies do not tend to find associations between all of their measures of social media use and/or gender norms. Some aspects of gender norms may be more closely linked to social media than others, such as pressure to conform to an idealised physical appearance.

5. **At the same time, studies caution against making blanket statements about the negative effects of social media, and some point to the positive potential**. Social media offers spaces where inequitable gender norms are challenged as well as reinforced (sometimes simultaneously). Adolescents employ social media in a variety of ways and demonstrate considerable agency in how they use it, with some seeking out opportunities to experiment

with less gender-stereotypical self-presentation. Three quantitative and mixed methods studies found that internet or social media use predicted more gender-equitable attitudes, and two found no association between aspects of social media use and gender norms. A range of qualitative research points to mixed effects and mutual reinforcement. While the quantitative studies reviewed often assume that the direction of influence is from social media to individuals' attitudes and behaviours, they also tend to suggest that existing gender norms influence social media experiences as well as being shaped by them.

6. The emerging findings suggest that **the impact on adolescents is likely to depend on how they interact with social media and the nature of the content they engage with**. Relevant factors can include the amount of time spent on social media, the type of content consumed (or produced), whether their social media use is active or passive or the types of users an individual interacts with, for example. Platforms that allow users to be anonymous and options for disappearing content appear to provide opportunities for adolescents to express themselves more freely. While some use this space to explore less gender-conforming ways of being, the same features can also provide openings to express discriminatory attitudes and behaviours without retaliation.

7. **Adolescents' social media use both shapes and is shaped by gender norms that prevail in their families, peer networks and other important social groups**. Online and offline spaces merge into one another, and adolescents' online experiences often reflect their offline lives. Indeed, the qualitative literature reviewed in this report suggests that adolescents tend to select and interpret content based on their existing interests and attitudes. Few studies have focused on the relative importance of social media compared with 'offline' messaging on social norms. Those that do often highlight the importance of factors such as education and family, peer and community influences. This reinforces the importance of efforts to promote more equitable norms in the offline sphere, as well as in online spaces. Strengthening adolescents' critical awareness of gender roles and norms offline may help to counter any negative effects of their online engagement.

8. **Some adolescents may be more susceptible than others to the effects of social media,** depending on, for example, their existing attitudes or their reactions to peer pressure. Research into whether there are common characteristics among boys who are particularly influenced by misogynistic online content in their attitudes to gender norms is very limited. It is also important to stress that efforts to identify any such characteristics should be wary of the risk of stigmatising or stereotyping particular social groups, and potentially reinforcing the trends they seek to counter.

9. **The 'back-end' of social media platforms – the operation of algorithms, their business models and extent of regulation – has a critical, but underappreciated, impact on the content that adolescents access**. The way in which social media algorithms work, for example, means that adolescents who start to view sexist content are likely to be shown more of such messaging, potentially leading to the radicalisation of their existing attitudes. This neglect of the wider context and incentives of social media companies means that important entry points for tackling harm are being missed. Recent evidence suggests that despite content moderation policies, violent and misogynistic content is still widely available and that more effective action in this area is a priority.

While further research is needed, what we do know, and what we do not, points to the need for nuance and care in the debate on the impact of social media on gender norms and masculinities among adolescent boys. Rather than framing social media as a risk in general, it is helpful to focus on the dangers, and positive potential, of particular kinds of use in a specific context. This requires understanding how specific patterns of social media use reflect and interact with other offline factors.

Emerging priorities for further research

Existing studies highlight several important areas where research is needed to strengthen the evidence base for policy, practice and the field of research, as follows:

Groups of interest

- Additional research that focuses specifically on adolescent boys and younger age groups.

- Strengthening intersectional perspectives, working with diverse populations within a particular country or region, while building the evidence base outside the United States and Europe.

Focus and framing

- Further studies to assess the impacts of social media engagement on gender norms and masculinity in particular (to complement content analysis). These should consider the potentially varied effects of different forms of use, such as time spent online, the nature of interaction with content, the origin of content (e.g. produced by influencer, shared by friends), and, potentially, purpose of engagement (e.g. socialising with friends, seeking information).

- Research should also probe the impacts of consuming explicitly misogynistic content, and content that reaffirms dominant forms of masculinity without being overtly sexist, both in the short and long term.

- Research is needed to examine the relative importance of social media use and the relationship between social media use and the wider factors that shape gender norms and socialisation processes.[28] This is important for ensuring that efforts to prevent harms arising from exposure to misogynistic content focus where they can have the greatest impacts.

- More work is needed to better understand the influence of social media platforms' business models, architecture, policies and practices on gender norms among adolescent boys.

- A greater focus is needed on young people's agency in their social media experiences, how it shapes their online experiences and their capacity to interpret online content based on their existing skills and experiences.

- While recognising the risks of adolescents' online lives, it is also important to explore the positive potential of online engagement and the counter-stereotypes transmitted through social media in parallel to highly misogynistic content. While quantitative studies on associations between social media use and gender norms often tend to start from the assumption of a negative effect, some show associations with more equitable attitudes and analyses of online content, as well as qualitative research that highlight the potential of social media to provide spaces to challenge discriminatory gender norms.

- More evaluations of efforts to promote critical digital literacy with a specific focus on gendered online content are needed. Given the diversity of these initiatives, they may variously be incorporated in school curricula, form part of after-school or non-formal programmes, or may be open access online initiatives.

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28 For example, by assessing a variety of potential influencing factors together in quantitative research (as in Patel et al., 2021 or Melzer et al., 2019), or embedding research on social media in ethnography or discussions of the wider lives of adolescents (as in Rsaissi and Couchot-Schiex, 2021; Miller et al., 2016; Couchot-Schiex and Richard, 2021).

Methods

- More research is needed on the pathways of influence between gender norms/masculinity and social media use. Qualitative and longitudinal research can complement quantitative research that explores cross-sectional correlations.

- Future quantitative research should also consider whether and how the variables and measures derived from research in Europe and North America need to be modified or replaced with those attuned to different cultural and socio-economic contexts.

In view of these areas for progress, further qualitative research with more diverse groups of adolescents on their experiences of social media may be particularly promising. This approach avoids imposing untested categories and causal mechanisms and gives voice to adolescents, highlighting their potential agency in shaping their own experiences on social media.

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Appendix

Annex 1 Influence of social media use on gender norms among adolescent boys and young men: overview of studies

Quantitative studies		
Authors and country	**Methods and sample**	**Main relevant results**
De Vries, et al. (2016), Netherlands	604 Dutch adolescents (aged 11–18), 50.7% female. Used bespoke measures of frequency of social media use and peer feedback and a translated version of the Body Areas Satisfaction Scale.	Social network site use predicts increased body dissatisfaction among both adolescent boys and girls.
De Vries, et al. (2019), Netherlands	School-based survey with 440 adolescents aged 12 to 19 (median age 14.9), 47 % female. Used the following tools: Body Attitude Test, an adapted version of the Multidimensional Scale of Facebook Use, and the Network of Relationships Questionnaire – Relationship Qualities Version (to measure the quality of relationships with parents).	Social media use is positively associated with body dissatisfaction, but this relationship is weaker among boys and girls who report more positive mother-adolescent relationships.
Fox, et al. (2015), US	Experiment with 172 men and women (50% male, median age 20.75 recruited from a large Midwestern University). Participants were asked to compose or retweet posts incorporating a sexist hashtag (#GetBackInTheKitchen) using an account that was either anonymous or that included identifying details. Before and after exposure, participants completed a purportedly unrelated survey with measures of hostile sexism (11-item hostile sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory). After exposure, they also completed a job hiring simulation in which they evaluated male and female candidates' resumes.	Experiment participants tweeting sexist content anonymously report higher levels of hostile sexism after tweeting than non-anonymous participants. Those who draft sexist tweets themselves also report greater hostile sexism and rank female job candidates as less competent in a job hiring simulation.
Gil Bermejo et al., (2021), Spain	400 14-16 year-old boys and girls from rural and urban areas in southern Spain. Attitudes were assessed with items from the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory and the Detected Sexism in Adolescent scale (DSA).	Significant associations between use of Instagram and Snapchat and sexist beliefs.
González Ortega, et al. (2020), Mexico	231 heterosexual adolescent girls and 212 adolescent boys (14-19) in Puebla. Used the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationship Inventory and the Cyber Dating Abuse Questionnaire.	Association between offline and online dating violence.
Manago et al. (2015), US	Survey with 467 female and 348 male undergraduate students attending a large Midwestern University (median age 19.5, who had been using social media on average for 6 years). Measures included their involvement in Facebook, body surveillance, appearance self-worth, and enjoyment of sexualisation. They also reported on feelings of body shame and sexual assertiveness.	Associations between survey measures of Facebook use and objectified body consciousness for both men and women.

Quantitative studies		
Authors and country	**Methods and sample**	**Main relevant results**
Manago, Walsh and Barsigian (2023), US	209 cisgender 9-12th grade students (59% girls, 53% white) enrolled in a public high school in northern California. Used an abbreviated version of the Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships and the Adolescent Feminine Ideology Scale.	Both biological sex and identification with gender 'ideologies' (identification with traditionally 'masculine' and 'feminine' forms of behaviour) are significant in shaping online behaviours.
Melzer, et al. (2019); Hale, et al. (2022), Luxembourg	Surveyed 361 girl/women and boys/men aged 14 to 30 (online and offline). Participants were asked i.a. about their emotional reactions to a stereotypical and non-stereotypical social media image, their attitudes towards gender roles and stereotypes (Positive-Negative Sex Role Inventory and Social Role Questionnaire) and their perceptions of which factors shape their attitudes towards gender roles.	While respondents perceive social media to have some influence on their views of a 'typical man' or a 'typical woman', they rate this influence as less significant than the influence of other factors such as family and peers, and men/boys rate social media as less influential than girls/women.
Mikorski and Szymanski (2017), US	329 heterosexual undergraduate men who completed an online survey. Examined relationship between sexist masculine norms in one's peer group, pornography consumption, and Facebook use.	Facebook use is associated with making unwanted sexual advances.
Oberst, et al. (2016), Spain (Catalonia)	623 secondary school students who used Facebook (331 females) aged between 12 and 16 from different Spanish schools in the region of Catalonia. They completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) first in terms of how they thought a typical adult would see them; one half then completed the scales in terms of how they saw themselves and the other half in terms of how they would self-present on Facebook.	No observed differences between adolescents' identification with gender roles offline and in their online self-portrayals.
Parent, et al. (2019), US	402 adult men (18-74) recruited via Mturk, an app for crowdsourcing workers, using three sub-scales of the Conformity to Masculine Norms Inventory-46, the Patient Health Questionnaire-9, and the Masculine Depression Scale.	Measures of toxic masculinity are associated with more negative online interactions, which are in turn associated with depression.
Patel, et al. (2021), India	10–19-year-old boys and girls (4,428 boys and 11,864 girls in two waves). Attitudes to gender roles were assessed via an index created on the basis of five age-appropriate questions for adolescents aged 10 to 14 and 15 to 19 at wave 1, respectively.	Access to the internet or social media has a positive effect on attitudes towards gender roles, except among younger boys.
Rousseau, et al. (2017), Belgium	Longitudinal panel study of 1,235 adolescents (12-19), 52 % male, median age 14.76, sampled 6 months apart in 15 randomly selected Flemish-speaking high schools. Measured associations between passive Facebook use (Passive Facebook Use Subscale of the Multidimensional Scale of Facebook Use), the frequency of social comparison on Facebook (measured as relative agreement with the statement: 'I often compare myself with others on Facebook when I am reading news feeds or checking others' photos'), and body dissatisfaction (the Body Dissatisfaction Subscale of the Body Attitude Test).	Indications of a reinforcing spiral between passive Facebook use, social comparison and body dissatisfaction among adolescent boys.

Quantitative studies		
Authors and country	Methods and sample	Main relevant results
Salomon and Spears-Brown (2019),US	Survey with 43 boys and 99 girls in seventh grade (median age 12.44) from four public middle schools in a mid-sized town in Southern United States. Assessed associations between frequency of social media use (whether or not they had accounts and how many hours they spent on each site per week), self-objectification behaviours on social media (assessed via a checklist indicating what they post about on social media), body surveillance and body shame (Body Surveillance and Body Shame subscales from the youth version of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale), and Self-monitoring (adolescents' tendencies to look to social cues from others to guide behaviour, assessed via a modified version of the Junior Self-Monitoring Scale).	Boys seeking social approval are vulnerable to effects of social media on body image.
Scharrer and Warren (2022), US	307 13–18 year-old boys and girls (median age 15.11, 49 % male). Survey used a scale drawing on the 'Masculine Roles and Norms Inventory-Adolescent-revised (MRNI-A-r).	Time spent on YouTube is associated with support for views of masculinity that favour emotional detachment and dominance.
Stein et al. (2021), Germany	Men (56) and women (171) aged 18 to 34 (recruited via university mailing lists and social media groups), median age 22.5. Used short German version of the Eating Attitudes Test, and the Body Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults.	Associations between browsing Instagram's public content and problematic eating behaviours among both men and women.
Tang (2020), US	101 male and female 18–19-year-olds were surveyed using the Sexual Objectification Survey- Revised (SOS-R), the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale- Short Form (IRMA-SF), the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (SOQ), the Social Media Use Scale, and the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (SMAS).	Higher frequency of social media use and exposure to sexualised images on social media is associated with sexual objectification of women and rape myth acceptance.
Turel (2022), US	Male and female 12th grade students (typically 17-18 years old). Analysed secondary data from the 2016–2020 Monitoring the Future surveys conducted across the US by the Institute for Social Research. Sexist attitudes) were measured with four items adapted from the short version of the Attitude Toward Women Scale.	Time spent on social media is associated with a reduction in sexist attitudes towards women.
van Oosten, et al. (2017), Netherlands	13-18 year old boys and girls (mean age: 14.94, 50% boys), with 1467 participating in all waves. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they had, during the past six months, uploaded pictures of themselves or viewed pictures of others (a) with a sexy gaze, (b) with a sexy appearance, (c) scantily dressed (e.g., bathing suit or underwear), and (d) in a sexy posture. Attitudes to gender roles were measured using items adapted from the Hyper Femininity Scale and the Hyper Masculinity Index.	Do not find evidence of effects of 'sexy self-representation' online on endorsement of stereotypical gender role orientation among boys and girls.

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Quantitative studies		
Authors and country	**Methods and sample**	**Main relevant results**
Wright (2017), US	233 eighth graders from two middle schools in the Midwestern United States. Identification with gender stereotypical attitudes assessed using the Bem Sex Role Inventory.	Identification with femininity and masculinity is associated with using different platforms for cyber aggression (social media for those identifying with more feminine stereotypes, and gaming for those identifying with more masculine stereotypes).

Qualitative and mixed methods studies		
Authors and country	**Methods and sample**	**Main relevant results**
Aleon, et al. (2019), Israel	20 adolescent girls, their mothers and grandmothers; and 20 adolescent boys, fathers and grandfathers in an Arab Bedouin community in Israel. Discussions in single gender, cross-generational groups prompted by vignettes. These focused on traditional views on family obligations, interdependence and gender hierarchy and 'Western' values favouring individual achievement, independence and gender equality.	Younger generations are more likely to support gender equality and highlight time spent on the internet and watching television as a key driver for differences in values across generations
Bamberger, et al. (2022), Germany	Following social media content analysis (of content related to 47 selected hashtags relevant to adolescent identity development), workshops with 23 participants aged 10-14 in Bavaria. Workshops included up to three modules, to discuss participants' use of audio-visual apps, use of Instagram and their perspectives on specific user profiles.	Preliminary findings suggest that adolescents may find Instagram profiles/influencers demonstrating commonalities (e.g. interest, geographical location) particularly attractive.
Bamberger, et al. (2023), Germany	Small group workshops with 62 adolescents aged 12-15 in Bavaria (3-9 participants per group). Workshops included (1) completion of a short questionnaire by each individual participant regarding their use of social media and Instagram (2) a practical exercise on their understanding of and perspectives on different Instagram functions and (3) questions and discussions about active and passive Instagram use, including gendered content.	The significant influence of both algorithms and adolescent agency in navigating Instagram – and its relationship with identity development.
Barbovschi, et al. (2017), Brazil	60 adolescents (11-17) in the metropolitan area of São Paolo, interviewed in 12 single-sex focus groups.	Younger age groups may be more susceptible to pressures. Possibility of gender norms shaping social media and social media shaping gender norms, including through peer feedback.
Bates (2020), Global/ English-speaking	Over the period of one year, the author immersed herself in the online 'incel' community, including by joining incel fora under a false identity. Questions included what attracts boys and young men to these fora.	Certain groups of men and boys may be particularly vulnerable to this content, including those searching for a sense of belonging, and may then become further radicalised.
Chatzopoulou, et al. (2019), UK	Interviews using Instagram posts as discussion prompts, with 25 young men (18-25) in the Northwest of the UK.	Those already struggling with body image issues are more eager to emulate social media images of male bodies and tend to engage more deeply with this content, while those with a better body image see it more critically.

Qualitative and mixed methods studies		
Authors and country	**Methods and sample**	**Main relevant results**
Couchot-Schiex (2017), France	French high-school students aged 12-15 years old in 12 schools in the Île-de-France region. Discussions prompted by showing the students example photos posted on Instagram and considering different responses depending on the gender of the person posting the image.	Pre-existing gender norms strongly shape adolescent boys' and girls' engagement with social media. Online feedback from their peers can then further increase pressure to conform to these.
Couchot-Schiex and Richard (2021), France	Survey with 1127 students (aged 12-15) in 12 schools in the Île-de-France region. Survey consisted of 101 questions on the school climate, experience of gender-based violence (GBV) and social media use. Interviews with 48 voluntary staff, and photo-based discussions with students (see previous entry).	Pre-existing gender norms are harshly enforced online through cyberviolence ('cybersexism') that further entrenches them.
Forsman (2017), Sweden	41 grade 7 students (approx. 13-year-old boys and girls) in four Stockholm schools with diverging socio-economic contexts. Focus group interviews between or after classes with 3 to 5 students.	Points to gendered constructions of selfies as a 'peer socialisation' mechanism, allowing adolescents to explore together how to 'do gender' online.
Jochim and Gebel (2022), Germany	Online workshops with 25 boys and girls, aged 10-16, based on a guide including modules such as a 'game'/exercise to assess their use of social media, discussions of (the gendered nature of) popular social media accounts and their favourite accounts.	Boys and girls interpret gendered content (more diverse gender expressions) through existing (binary) gender norms.
Maddocks and Parfaite (2023), Global/ English-speaking	Content analysis (sentiment and thematic analysis) of 27,510 user comments on 28 of the most popular videos produced as part of the 'pretend to punch your girlfriend' trend on TikTok.	Young people may receive and interpret (misogynistic) gendered online content in diverse ways.
Manago and McKenzie (2022), Global	Investigation of the cultural nature of adolescent development and digital media use, based on existing anthropological and ethnographic research in diverse regions of the world, including the authors' own fieldwork in Thailand and Mexico.	While digital media is a part of adolescents' lives almost everywhere, the extent to which it is used and how it is used varies by cultural context.
Manago and Pacheco (2019), Mexico	Interview data were collected in 2009 when participants were adolescents (n = 80) and then again in 2015 when they were young adults (n = 68). Values and beliefs for gender were measured using vignettes that were created through previous fieldwork. Young adults were also asked about their use of mobile phones and social media and completed a social network mapping activity.	Internet and social media use does not predict gender-related views independent of its relationship with high school attendance.
Martínez and Olsson (2019), Sweden	46 9–12-year-olds from two schools in the South of Sweden and from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds. Groups interviews, most of which had four participants in a combination of mixed-gender and same-sex groups.	Children interpret (gendered) online content through pre-existing, diverse attitudes towards gender roles.
Miller, et al. (2016), in Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Turkey and Trinidad	Ethnographic research on/with men and women of different age groups, over a 15-month period.	Social media has *both* reified existing gender norms and relations and led to transformations.

Qualitative and mixed methods studies		
Authors and country	**Methods and sample**	**Main relevant results**
Ney (2016), Knoll (2013), Austria	Workshops and online questionnaires with boys and girls aged 14 to 20 in five types of schools (including vocational schools) in Vienna and the regions of Lower and Upper Austria. Schools were selected to represent a variety of urban and rural settings. A total of 48 boys and 40 girls participated in the workshops. Questionnaires (administered as part of the second round of workshops) focused on adolescents' perceptions of specific (fictional) social media accounts.	Boys' and girls' online representation reflects and enforces gender norms.
O'Rourke and Haslop (2023), UK	Previews some main findings of unpublished research with young people (aged 18-25) across the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) from diverse genders, sexual orientations, racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Focus groups and interviews were conducted.	Previews selected key findings from yet to be published research, including how online gendered norms reflect and reproduce those already existing in wider society and the inextricable links between digital and non-digital spaces experienced by many young people.
Potts (2017), US	31 male college students at a private, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. Methods included individual interviews, synchronous ethnographic digital observations, and focus groups.	The relationship between social media and masculine identity development may evolve/go through different stages as young men move through the different years of their college experience.
Rsaissi and Couchot-Schiex (2021), France	Students (11-15) at a secondary school in the Seine-Saint-Denis Department, Paris (with high levels of immigration and relatively low income levels). Ethnography and interviews with 14 girls and 12 boys.	Pre-existing gender norms strongly shape adolescent boys' and girls' engagement with social media. Online feedback from their peers can then further increase pressure to conform to these.
Scharrer, et al. (2023), US	54 6th grade students (boys and girls aged 11 and 12) from a public elementary school in New England. Data drawn from a homework assignment completed by 43 students (22 identifying as male, 19 as female, 1 as gender fluid, and 1 as transgender male), involving observing and analysing gender expression and representation on Youtube.	Young people may receive and interpret gendered online messages in diverse ways.
Sills, et al. (2016), New Zealand	Semi-structured interviews with 17 young people (primarily female, between the ages of 16 and 23) who were critical of rape culture. The participants discussed examples they had witnessed, including victim-blaming. 'slut-shaming', rape jokes, the celebration of male sexual conquest, and demeaning sexualised representations of women.	Participants see social media as *both* perpetuating rape culture and offering online spaces which provide inspiration, education and solidarity to combat attitudes endorsing violence against women and girls.
Whitehead and Ringrose (2021), UK	Black British teenagers aged 16 and 17) from a London secondary school. The sample included 88 girls, 55 boys and 1 gender fluid young person. Data were gathered from small focus groups, and discussions were prompted by of images to spark discussion about selfies, sexts and managing sexualised content online.	'Memes' serve as both vehicles of misogyny and opportunities for solidarity and resilience.
Waechter (2021), Austria	16 interviews and 4 focus group discussions with 5 school students each (total sample of 36 school students, composed of boys and girls 13 and 15 years old), at a large high school (Gymnasium) in Vienna.	Teenagers construct collectivities in several ways when using social media with their peers. The way social media platforms contribute to peer belonging varies between boys and girls.

Literature reviews and theoretical analyses		
Authors and country	**Focus**	**Main relevant results**
Balleys (2017a)	Reflections on the role of gender in adolescent social media socialisation, based on literature review.	Significant role of peer-to-peer relations.
Balleys (2017b)	Review of literature on ICT/smartphone/ social media use and adolescent (gender) socialisation.	Social media/smartphone use is both empowering and subjects adolescents to increased control by peers and family.
Flores and Browne (2017)	Review and theoretical analysis of role of social media in transforming gender-based violence, gendered identity construction and social relations among young people.	Points to the need to investigate the impact of social media on how young people construct their gender identities and societal relations.
Göbbels (2015)	Review of literature on gendered self-representation of youth on social media.	Highlights peer socialisation, competition for positive peer feedback through gendered posts and particularly harsh enforcement of gender norms online, suggesting mutual reinforcement.
Götz and Prommer (2019)	Review of literature on gender stereotypes and social media.	Highlights need for further research on masculinity, boys and men.
Guo (2022)	Review of impact of media on adolescents' perceptions of gender roles.	Limited research on social media in general and on their gendered effects (as opposed to content) in particular.
Koschei (2021)	Review of the current evidence base on gender roles, youth and social media.	Predominance of content analyses, lack of intersectional perspectives, limited focus on younger adolescents (up to ca. 12 years).
Schmeichel, et al. (2018)	Review of qualitative literature on youth social media use in the field of education.	Focus on femininity, diverse concepts of social media, neglect of the intentional 'neo-liberal' design of platforms.

Annex 2 Common theoretical perspectives

The studies reviewed differ not only in the way in which social media use and gender norms are understood, but also in how they conceptualise the pathways of influence between them and the most appropriate methods to assess any such influence. While some studies do not state their theoretical underpinnings, others tend to borrow relevant theories from more established scholarship on the influence of 'traditional media', such as television, on social norms. Social media is, therefore, often portrayed as broadly in continuity with 'traditional' media and relevant research.

Common theoretical perspectives often assume a negative influence, pointing to potential associations between social media use and stereotyped, discriminatory and harmful gender norms rather than any positive online opportunities to convey and express more diverse, authentic ways of being. Relevant theoretical perspectives drawn upon in the studies reviewed include: cultivation theory; social comparison theory; objectification theory; peer socialisation; and media practice and reinforcing spiral models. These are summarised below.

- **Cultivation theory** was first developed to analyse the impacts of television. It suggests that these are slow, incremental and cumulative, and depend on repeated media exposure over time. Applied to social media, cultivation theory, therefore, suggests that the extent of social media usage would have the greatest impact in shaping norms. As a result, research based on cultivation theory has compared viewers with different self-reported levels of consumption. Some studies have applied cultivation theory to the impacts of social media on gender-related norms and attitudes (Scharrer and Warren, 2022; Stein et al., 2021; Turel, 2022). This approach has its drawbacks in relation to social media, however.[29] In particular, it assumes an influence that goes one way, rather than recognising users' agency in selecting content.

- **Social comparison theory** has been positioned as an alternative to cultivation theory (Stein et al., 2021) and is based on people's tendency to evaluate their identity by comparing themselves to others (Oberst et al., 2016). Comparisons to those who seem more successful can undermine self-esteem (particularly given the common manipulation and curation of social media images and feeds) (Lui et al., 2017; Vogel et al., 2014; Yang, 2016). This means that the peer-to-peer nature of social media may have as great an influence as the scale and reach of its messages.

- **Objectification theory** explores how social media can alter users' perceptions of themselves, rather than others. It suggests that participation in social media culture (including sharing photos of oneself) can drive an outsiders' perspective of themselves, including their own bodies (e.g. Turel, 2022; Manago et al., 2015; Salomon and Spears-Brown, 2019).

- Other studies emphasise the effects of **peer socialisation,** focusing on peer-to-peer elements to highlight the particular importance of peer feedback during adolescence. Adolescents can interact with their peer community on social media without much adult intervention, learning the social rules of these online spaces, seeking acceptance, building the friendships and adjusting their behaviour based on peer feedback (Waechter, 2021; Waechter and Meschik, 2023).

The enforcement of these norms can be particularly harsh in online spaces, and users soon learn what is desirable (Göbbels, 2015; Knoll et al., 2013; Ney, 2016). This socialisation is driven by peer interaction, rather than content fed to adolescents by an outside force. **Rather than an extension of television,** this perspective would suggest that social media is in continuity with the telephone – long

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29 Other challenges include the fact that some studies suggest that observable effects on gender-related attitudes *may* occur relatively quickly (e.g. Fox et al., 2015). Second, if more complete effects unfold over a 'longer' timeframe, this begs the question: what would be a meaningful interval for measurement?

used by adolescents for 'adult-free' interaction – or the physical spaces in schools, such as toilets and schoolyards, that are important for socialisation (Couchot-Schiex, 2017).

- The **media practice model** suggests that what adolescents take from social media reflects ongoing interactions across the media, their existing attitudes and values and their day-to-day experiences and behaviours (Steele, 1999; Steele and Brown, 1995).

- The **reinforcing spirals model** suggests that individuals tend to select communication sources and content that reinforce their existing attitudes, social identity and behaviour (Slater, 2007; Slater et al., 2020). While this suggests that the impact may be negligible when these are already stable, it could be greater when identities are being formed or changing (as in adolescence).

The pathways of influence outlined in these distinct theoretical perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may help make sense of different aspects of the use and features of social media. This means that a range of theories may be needed to gauge the influence of social media on gender norms. For example, a reassessment of cultivation theory in light of 'new media' by Morgan et al. (2015) suggests that cultivation theory may be more appropriate for the analysis of some aspects of social media than others. While scrolling through content may have effects similar to those of watching television, other uses, such as composing a post or message, may be more like a personal communication. Similarly, peer-socialisation mechanisms may be more evident on platforms and in sub-communities shared mainly with peers, rather than adult family members.

Some of these theories may also be culturally specific, emerging from conditions in a particular context. Waechter (2021) for example, recognises that the notion of self-socialisation through media may be linked, in part, to the individualisation processes in Western societies, where media may be replacing aspects of traditional 'socialisation agents' such as family and school. These conditions may not be present in all societies and cultural communities to the same extent.

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 – discriminatory gender norms.

ALIGN Programme

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