

Summary – Duckface/Stoneface

Background

The Swedish Media Council study “Duckface/Stoneface” investigate fundamental online activities among 10- and 13-year-olds from a gender perspective. The study was conducted since quantitative data from the Kids & media studies suggest that differences between boys’ and girls’ media habits are limited up to the age of ten, to increase substantially during early adolescence. The gender differences are greatest regarding the use of social media and video games. While girls spend significantly more time than boys using social media, the relationship is the reverse as concerns gaming. This pattern is evident and raises questions about what lies behind these differences, what consequences they have, and how parents, teachers, and other adults close to children can relate to them. The aim of the Duckface/Stoneface study is to gain a deeper understanding of these gender differences by the use of qualitative methods (focus group interviews and workshops). In total 63 boys and 79 girls participated in the study.

Main findings

One of the most evident observation is very strong features of *gender segregation* both online and offline. Boys and girls aged thirteen live in separate online worlds and do what they can so as not to be in the same arenas. It is also clear that masculinity, as a rule, is viewed as superior to the femininity. Girls and boys alike distance themselves from and depreciate “girlish” online activities. It also seems as if the homosocial communities are reinforced online: it is easier to choose not to associate with the other gender online than it is in school. It is also evident that those children interviewed display and “make” age through their online behaviour. They are not passive victims of old gender roles, but actively contribute to the construction of gender positions through their behaviour. Finally, there is a *social* hierarchy among the participants, where games and images are used as style markers such as taste in music or fashion can be social/cultural distinctions.

Results

It is evident that the participants in the study participate, and are seen, by following, linking, disseminating, viewing, and searching. Frequently, this participatory communication is linked to pop idols and popular culture. Creating and publishing longer texts, music, or more “artistic” images or films by oneself, however, did not appear as a major activity.

Among girls, it is not unusual to follow blogs and vlogs that deal with shopping, clothes, and cosmetics, while boys talk more about vlogs that have to do with popular digital games.

A large part of the online communication between children discussed in this study consists of visual communication. They upload their images to more or less open social networks such as Facebook, Instagram or Tumblr, or send them to each other through MMS or Kik, for example.

There is a strong awareness of the image conventions gender coded either as “boyish” or “girlish” among both ten-year-olds and thirteen-year-olds. At the core of these are what is commonly known as *selfies*, self-portraits taken with one’s own mobile phone camera and then disseminated in social networks. Boys regard certain image conventions as impossible to use since they are perceived as “girlish” or – even worse – “gay”. Boys’ image conventions are dominated by appearing energetic and unfazed – not to pay much attention either to how the picture looks or how others perceive it. The ideal is to display a *stoneface*. Since they are very aware of how a selfie should and should not look they do in fact pay a lot of attention to it – but it should appear as they don’t. Among the “girlish” conventions are such things as manipulating and editing the pictures in an aesthetic style, making the picture askew to achieve a dynamic composition, smiling for the camera, updating one’s profile picture (much too) often and – completely unthinkable for boys – making a *duckface* (pouting for the camera) and looking like a bimbo¹. Girls do all this but describe it in apologetic terms, well aware that it can be perceived by others as a little conceitedly ridiculous. It is important for boys and girls alike to absolutely not seem younger than they are, or “childish”. There is an age gap between ten-year-olds and thirteen-year-olds: distancing themselves from the younger kids is fundamental, and the idea is instead to appear older than one’s actual age. It is, however, important not to go too far in the effort to seem older – this can also make someone seem like a bimbo.

Through their own actions and their ideas and preconceptions of each other, boys and girls contribute to what in gender theory is often called *gender segregation*. This means that the children, through their own actions and ideas about gender, create their identity and group affiliation by persistently emphasizing the difference between boys and girls. This takes place at the same time as society in general, and schools in particular, conform to an explicit ideology and rhetoric permeated by egalitarian thought and aspirations towards increased gender awareness. The interviews showed how *the masculine is made the standard* by describing what girls do, and online actions associated with being “womanish” or “gay” (trying to get “likes” on Facebook, uploading a lot of pictures, certain types of expressions, etc.) in negative terms.

Through their friendship and their media actions online, children at this age thus go through a form of *gender training* that does not automatically open up to critical awareness and change, but rather appears to presuppose conformity with the traditional superiority of the masculine.

Looking natural is part of both boys’ and girls’ ideals for presenting themselves. It is, however, a question of different types of naturalness. For girls, comprehensive planning and work on themselves and on the picture are required to appear natural, while a boy’s picture should appear like it was taken spontaneously with little afterthought.

¹ There are different behaviours associated with being a bimbo, which certain pictures could confirm: trying to appear older than you are, using a lot of cosmetics, claims that you have a fun life filled with parties, alcohol and older boys. Girls are most often associated with the concept bimbo, even if boys can also be bimbos: lots of hair gel, spiky hair, accentuated eyebrows, and certain kinds of clothing are a few of the style markers.

Girls

Take a lot of pictures until you get a good one
Don't upload pictures where you look ugly

Look cute
Look happy

Use image filters

Look out from under your brow
(therefore hold the camera high)

Look natural
Have newly-bought clothes on
Keep your eyebrows raised

Dare to show some skin, but be careful
so it isn't too much

Don't upload pictures where you don't
have make-up on

Making a duckface is good, but do it
correctly

Boys

Changing pictures is unnecessary
Don't look like you're out after
approval

Look cool
Don't show any sugary expressions,
make a stoneface

Photograph yourself from a low
angle so you look bigger
If you want to attract girls: hold the
camera high, look out from under
your brow and keep your eyebrows
raised

Be natural
Show off the new things you've
bought

Doing something in the picture is
good (like skateboarding or doing
tricks on your bike)

It's good to have a bare chest, at
least if you're physically fit.

Don't have too much hair gel and the
like in your hair, it could look artificial
or gay

Don't make a duckface
Caps are cool

Gaming

Gaming on mobile phones, consoles and computers are part of an everyday culture build around habits and rituals. For the boys' part at both ages ten and thirteen, it dealt a great deal with the adventure and construction game *Minecraft*. Other games for home computers and consoles that were important were *League of Legends* (team play against monsters), *Battlefield 3* (first person shooter war game), *FIFA* (football game) and a few other titles. As regards games for mobile phones, *Clash of Clans* and *Subway Surfers* were the ones most often mentioned.

Elements of struggle, survival, and violence are central in many of these games, at the same time as they have evident social functions such as text and/or voice chat. The positions in the masculine hierarchy are negotiated and reappraised within a homosocial, gender bound community of children of the same age. This occurs through both the status that can be won by knowing a lot about games and digital technology, by being a skilful player, and through the social interaction taking place between the boys in chat. Even if online gaming can occur between complete strangers, at these ages it is very common that classmates and groups of friends play together. Gaming, in this context, is thus an extension of the social positioning that takes place in school or "outside", after

school time. Games and gaming serve not only as an online meeting place for the boys. It is also common to gather at someone's house and hang out with gaming as the collective activity.

Games are also important for the girls, at least for ten-year-olds. They discussed primarily game sites such as *MovieStarPlanet* and *Star Doll*. The focus here is largely on cultivating a character's appearance and personal qualities in order to get social approval, money, and fame. There are both elements of competition and community. *Pou* and *Star Stable* are games that largely deal with taking care of something. *Pou* is a little creature that needs food, sleep, care, and so on, whereas in *Star Stable* you take care of horses and compete with them.

It can thus be argued that the themes of the games are highly gender stereotypical. Girls' gaming is dominated by titles where, on the one hand, appearance, fashion, cosmetics, and glamour are central, and on the other hand deal with nurturing and taking care. Boys' gaming, instead, deals with "traditionally masculine activities": war, struggle and mastery, either in pure war games or in sports games such as *FIFA* or *NHL*. The odd man out in this context is the combined adventure and construction game *Minecraft*, played by both girls and boys, if to a greater degree by the latter.

The study was conducted out for the Swedish Media Council by associate professor Michael Forsman in the spring of 2013, using interviews and workshops with a total of 142 students from four schools in the Stockholm area.