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*How Adolescents Experience and Navigate the Achievement Imperative on Social Media*

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# 'You Can't Do Anything Right': How Adolescents Experience and Navigate the Achievement Imperative on Social Media

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## Abstract

The rise in mental health issues among youth has been linked to an emergence of an achievement imperative, causing a rise in personal expectations and achievement demands, with social media highlighted as a significant contributor to these developments. This study examined experiences of achievement demands on social media and well-being through focus groups and individual interviews with early adolescents ( $n = 80$ , ages 12–16 years). Achievement demands and a culture of perfection, along with their negative effects hereof, were mainly experienced in relation to adolescents' public digital lives and, particularly among the youngest adolescents, the quantity and frequency of communication with friends. Achievement practices were structured by gender, with higher expectations for girls to present self-centred idealized and attractive versions of themselves. Boys were more often expected to appear social, active and prosperous. Sexual presentations of girls and self-centred pictures of boys were often considered distasteful and associated with lower-class culture.

## Keywords

Social media, achievement, mental health, gender, adolescents, culture

## Introduction

A review of recent trends in the area of mental health reveals a rise in such issues as stress, anxiety, depression and a general lack of well-being in young people,

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particularly girls. In the Danish context, an increasing number of adolescents are reportedly experiencing stress, sleep problems, loneliness, anxiety and low quality of life (Rasmussen et al., 2018). Similar patterns are found in a wide range of western countries (Cosma et al., 2020). Within sociological youth research, these developments have been discussed in relation to the emergence of what can best be summarized as a strong achievement imperative (Madsen, 2021), under which young people are struggling to meet high and even unrealistic achievement demands in general success, flawlessness, self-management, growth and distinction (Curran & Hill, 2019; Eckersley, 2011; Katznelson et al., 2021; Luthar, 2003; Petersen, 2016).

This achievement imperative has been problematized in youth research in such areas as high or excessive achievement demands within the educational system (grades and future education possibilities) (Banks & Smyth, 2015; Krogh, 2022b; Låftman et al., 2013), growing competitive attitudes towards leisure activities (Batchelor et al., 2020) and physical attractiveness (Eriksen, 2021). But no place is this more evident than on social media sites due to a culture of highly idealized and positive self-presentations (Banjanin et al., 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016), the rapid production of new material (Reckwitz, 2020) and the time and energy that these platforms demand of young people (Elhai et al., 2018; MacIsaac et al., 2018). However, empirical research on the effects of social media is also quite diverse and continues to identify both positive and negative aspects (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Keles et al., 2019). Similarly, as Madsen (2021) argues, the achievement imperative as an explanation for the decline in youth mental health is still underdeveloped in terms of empirical investigation. The present study aims to contribute to the research by empirically investigating the ways in which the experiences of a socioeconomically diverse group of Danish early adolescents relate to the characterizations of the achievement imperative. In addition, the study explores how these experiences affect their general well-being by answering the research question: how do early adolescents experience and navigate the contemporary achievement demands prescribed by social media?

Social media is a very broad term, and the different platforms, functionalities, cultures and use of social media tend to vary greatly among youth (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; Masciantonio et al., 2021). Less is known about the more specific ways in which social media is associated with the achievement demands for success, flawlessness, self-management, growth and distinction among early adolescents. By answering this research question, the study aims to contribute to the research on the dangers facing youth who are exposed to social media. Moreover, previous research has continuously highlighted the importance of considering gender when studying social media use among youth (Ruckel & Hill, 2017; Wood et al., 2016) and the achievement imperative in general (Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2009), the study also considers how the experiences of the achievement imperative relate to gendered expectations of social media.

### *Achievements and Social Media*

Social media has been linked to achievement demands and high personal expectations in multiple ways. Reckwitz (2020) has argued that, increasingly, social

media platforms in contemporary society have become places where subjects are expected or demanded to work and curate their own singularity, uniqueness and achievements to compete for attention and valorisation. Youth research has also found that social media sites tend to be dominated by highly idealized and visually positive self-presentations (Banjanin et al., 2015; Burnette et al., 2017; Marengo et al., 2018; Smahel et al., 2020; Woods & Scott, 2016). These characteristics are among the main reasons social media use among youth has been linked to multiple issues, including fear of missing out (FOMO) (Dhir et al., 2018; Elhai et al., 2018), upward social comparisons (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Liu et al., 2017), problematic internet use due to socially prescribed perfectionism (Casale et al., 2014) and body image concerns (Dilling & Petersen, 2021; Richards et al., 2015). All of these represent issues that can result in feelings of loneliness, envy, inadequacy, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and decreased well-being. In that sense, social media can be said to act as a catalyst for the increase in personal achievement demands among youth. Moreover, as social media generally allows for a high degree of control in impression management (Bollmer, 2018), previous research has concluded that the high degree of self-tracking on digital media pushes individuals towards an even higher degree of self-maintenance and self-improvement than found elsewhere (Krüger, 2019). For this reason, the achievement demands of social media can intensify on these platforms compared to the physical or in-person contexts.

Furthermore, given that the decline in mental health among youth has been most pervasive among girls, research on social media has repeatedly highlighted the importance of taking a more gendered perspective into account, as the norms for self-presentations, experienced surveillance and effects of social interaction within these digital arenas tend to vary greatly depending on gender (Ruckel & Hill, 2017; Wood et al., 2016), especially in relation to body image concerns (Dilling & Petersen, 2021; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). For this reason, multiple studies have shown how the positive effects of social media tend to favour boys. At the same time, the female body is at higher risk of being labelled shameful, slutty, naive or lacking self-respect when presented on social media (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

While the research presented above highlights negative aspects of social media, prior research has also shown how platforms can be tools to facilitate the social lives of early adolescents (Krogh, 2022a) which has been linked to increased perceived social support and self-esteem (Best et al., 2014), sense of community (Oh et al., 2014), belonging and self-disclosure (Davis, 2012). All of these factors have positive effects on the well-being of young people. Consequently, previous research warns of unambiguous and broad characterizations of social media as a whole, cautioning against devoting less attention to the diverse nature of platforms and the various ways in which social media affects young people in a positive way. Likewise, less attention has been given to exploring how the negative aspects of social media relate to broader imperatives within youth research. Finally, a majority of the research presented above, and the research on the effects of social media on mental health in general, have been conducted among college students (Appel et al., 2016). Hence, significantly less is known about the effects of social media on early adolescents. More research is needed on the use of social media among early adolescents, particularly in light of their potential for greater social media use,

their general preference for highly visual forms of social media and their developing identities.

### *Theoretical Framework: The Achievement Imperative*

The theoretical framework of this study is based on perspectives of how social inclusion criteria of contemporary society have become increasingly achievement-based. According to Petersen (2016), contemporary society is characterized by the increasing individual achievement demands of continuously striving towards personal achievements, growth, success and perfectionism in all aspects of life. Similarly, Rosa (2010) has argued that contemporary society is characterized by an accelerating pace, competitiveness and an increased pressure to self-manage. According to Rosa, the accelerating pace of everyday life forces individuals to continuously achieve in order to gain recognition. Finally, Reckwitz (2020) argues that contemporary ideals are strongly based on singularities which demand that individuals present themselves as unique and distinct from others. For Reckwitz, the competition for recognition intensifies on social media platforms given the vast amount of new content that is being continuously produced at any given time. The commonality of these characterizations is that they all depict a society in which the general bar for what individuals are expected to achieve has been raised significantly. Mental illness is thus understood in terms of social pathologies as the exhaustive downside of this achievement imperative, that is, as structural changes in the demands for societal inclusion cause suffering and unhappiness (Madsen, 2021). Among youth, this rise in personal expectations and achievement demands has been linked to a rise in feelings of inadequacy, critical introspection and depression (Eckersley, 2011; Petersen, 2016). Similarly, the accelerating pace of everyday life has been linked to burnout and stress (Katznelson et al., 2021; Rosa, 2010). However, it is less clear if, when and how this relates more specifically to the diverse nature of social media use among contemporary youth. The present study applies this theoretical framework to investigate what is experienced as achievement demands on social media among a diverse group of early adolescents to further an understanding of ways in which the social media use of young people relates to the achievement imperative in which a general rise in demands of success, flawlessness, self-management, growth and distinction is said to have caused the decline in mental health among youth. In doing so, the theoretical framework is also used to link the experienced demands of social media with the well-being of the adolescents.

Moreover, as gender has been highlighted as an important factor to consider when studying the social media experiences of youth (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015), the achievement demands of social media may also be highly gender specific. As Skeggs (2004) argues, the influence of broader societal imperatives tends to vary greatly depending on factors such as gender and class, and previous researchers have argued that the achievement demands and ideals of contemporary society are highly gendered (Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2009). Consequently, the theoretical framework of this study also considers how the experienced achievement demands of social media are intertwined with the gendered expectations of social media that adolescents experience.

## Method

### Study Design and Procedure

This study is based on a total of 18 focus groups and 20 individual interviews ( $n = 80$ ; 48% boys and 52% girls; age range 12–16; mean age 14.05) conducted in the fall of 2020, evenly distributed between four distinct schools in Denmark to secure a diverse sample of adolescents to include in the study (see Table 1 for an overview of participants and schools). To capture differences between school districts, *automated area redistricting* (Lund, 2018) was applied by combining the registry and geographical data of the school districts. Two schools were located in school districts characterized by high income and highly educated residents (one urban and one rural school according to municipal administrative boundaries). The remaining two schools were located in districts characterized by low socioeconomic status (SES) (one urban and one rural school). As a means for immersion in the field and to secure a more comfortable relationship with the participants (Kawulich, 2005), all participants were recruited during participant observations in classes and during breaks through a convenience and pragmatic approach to sampling and sample size (Levitt et al., 2018). While it is difficult to assess the appropriate number of participants in qualitative research, the degree to which new data repeat previous findings during the last school visit indicates a high degree of saturation in relation to the research question. For ethical reasons, all parents and pupils at each school were informed of the study in advance. Similarly, informed oral consent (including purpose of the study, confidentiality, anonymity and ability to withdraw consent) for participating in the study was initially obtained during informal conversations held with the pupils during classes and breaks. Written informed consent was subsequently obtained from all participants' parents/guardians. In general, the adolescents at all schools were excited by the prospect of participating in the study.

**Table 1.** School District Characteristics and Participant Overview.

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
Location	Rural	Rural	Urban	Urban
Avg district income	342596.36	298367.62	493498.98	27819.21
Avg district edu. length	13.77	12.89	14.65	13.67
Participants (N)	19	22	21	18
Girls/boys	10/9	12/10	11/10	9/9
Age (mean)	14.10	14.00	14.16	13.94
Focus groups				
Number of groups	4	4	6	4
Avg length (minutes)	59.03	47.24	52.57	53.26
Individual interviews				
Number of interviews	6	5	4	5
Avg length (minutes)	38.55	38.84	38.42	37.99

**Source:**

**Note:** Avg district income = Average net total personal yearly tax income in DKK; Avg district edu. length = Average full years completed education including mandatory primary education.

During the focus group interviews, boys and girls were in separate focus groups, and the groups were kept relatively small (usually 3–4 participants), as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000) for this age group. Furthermore, to secure a comfortable interview situation, all groups consisted of pupils who defined themselves as friends, which may have encouraged conformity instead of disagreement and resulted in a more unanimously collective voice being presented during the interviews (Belzile & Öberg, 2012). This choice was also made for ethical reasons, as not to ‘disturb’ the social dynamics of the classrooms or to potentially cause conflicts. The focus groups all followed a semi-structured interview guide consisting of the following topics: youth today, achievement demands, social media, grey areas and well-being. As a means to spark discussions and co-creation of meaning, newspaper headlines relevant to each topic were used as props to initiate each topic (e.g., ‘Social media stresses young people’), with the adolescents being asked to assess the statements of the headlines. The individual in-depth interviews followed a similar semi-structured interview guide consisting of the same topics but aimed at a more in-depth understanding of each participant’s personal experiences (Tanggaard, 2009) without newspaper headlines. All interviews were conducted in private, quiet locations at each school (e.g., conference rooms) during school hours. As the study involved early adolescents, a great deal of attention was given to the power relations and ensured that no adolescent felt forced to answer questions. Furthermore, the purpose of the study, confidentiality and anonymity and the ability to withdraw consent or refuse to answer questions were repeated before each interview started. After each interview, the interviewer took time and asked follow-up questions to ensure that all participants were comfortable and well before returning to class. The names of schools have been removed, and all adolescents have been given an alias. In Denmark, it is not common practice nor a requirement for a qualitative study such as the present study to undergo ethical review by an official ethical board. Instead, researchers are required to follow the ‘Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity’.

### *Data Analysis*

All interviews were recorded (approximately 29 hours of interview), transcribed and subsequently analysed using NVivo-12. The analytic approach was inspired by Layder (2013) and included a combination of inductive and deductive analytic strategies. The initial approach to the coding was deductive and focused on experiences of achievement demands on social media along with expressions of subjective well-being (e.g., feelings of stress, anger, anxiety, happiness). The subsequent inductive procedure was a more open coding related to aspects outside of the achievement realm, which was employed to study how the adolescents viewed the distinction between the achievement-dominated and the nonachievement-dominated aspects of social media. Similarly, the connection between the adolescents’ digital and physical everyday lives (e.g., at school, with friends and during leisure activities) was also coded inductively and in an open-ended fashion. After these steps were completed, background information (school, gender, age and interview type) was used as a way to assess differences and similarities between different groups of adolescents. Ultimately, five analytical themes capturing the distinct ways

the early adolescents experienced and navigated achievement demands in relation to social media emerged from combining the coding categories, along with assessments of how these aspects were related to different groups of adolescents. The participants were, however, predominantly white, and only a small number of bilingual adolescents were included. As a result, the study does not provide insights into how experiences of achievement demands on social media are shaped by other social categories, such as ethnicity. Finally, as the study was conducted within a Danish context and within a single municipality, the findings cannot be generalized directly to other contexts. For the same reason, the transferability of the findings of this study will likely differ greatly depending on the national and local context.

## Findings

### *The Polished Self*

Consistent with the findings of previous research (Banjanin et al., 2015; Woods & Scott, 2016), when asked about the achievement demands of social media, all the adolescents acknowledged a culture of perfection and positive self-presentations on social media, particularly in relation to presenting an idealized and ‘polished’ version of oneself (Hogan, 2010; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; MacIsaac et al., 2018). This included, among other things, physical attractiveness, exciting lifestyles, fancy and healthy foods, exotic travel destinations and flourishing social lives (Reckwitz, 2020) along with a culture of positive and complimentary feedback among peers (although not necessarily genuine but rather part of the routine and the culture of positivity on certain platforms). This was, however, mainly the case for what the adolescents described as the public spheres of social media, that is, the areas to which all of their friends, followers and connections had access. This included areas such as their Instagram and TikTok profiles along with Snapchat stories posted to their entire friend list. These spheres of social media, particularly Instagram, were those mainly associated with achievement demands of success, flawlessness and distinction (Curran & Hill, 2019; Eckersley, 2011; Katznelson et al., 2021; Luthar, 2003; Petersen, 2016), and the practices of these spheres, for the most part, revolved around ideals of presenting an optimal, polished version of oneself to the outside world. At the same time, the achievement demands of the public spheres were often described as excessive or unrealistically high and, at the same time, were highlighted as the main sources of feelings of negative self-evaluation, inadequacy, jealousy, loneliness, stress and anxiousness as a result of using social media—feelings often highlighted as the downside of the achievement imperative (Madsen, 2021):

Simone (9th-grade girl): Then, you start to compare yourself.

Anna (9th-grade girl): Yeah, and when you see other people’s lives, how perfect it all looks, then you start to think, that’s how my own life should be.

Simone (9th-grade boy): And then you get stressed out and start thinking to yourself, ‘What am I doing here?’ ‘What do I have to do to become that?’ and ‘Why aren’t I like that?’. It can be very stressful.



For some adolescents, particularly girls, maintaining one's polished self required a high degree of effort, self-management and self-maintenance (Krüger, 2019; Rosa, 2010) and included activities such as taking multiple pictures, selecting clothes that highlight a certain physique, finding a suitable filter for the picture, matching profile colour schemes, posting pictures at the right time of day, continuously updating profiles with new pictures (but not too often), deleting old pictures from the profile and, in some cases, editing or retouching the pictures. The adolescents also gave concrete examples of how failure to do these things could result in the loss of followers. Importantly, while hard work and energy were involved in posting a picture, it still needed to appear effortless to avoid being considered a 'try-harder' or an 'attention seeker'. 'You can't do anything right', as one 9th-grade girl, Layla, explained. Finally, a few adolescents even described how some adolescent Instagram accounts are set up as business accounts, which allows them to track and evaluate their profile activity to a higher degree (e.g., view-to-like ratio).

For many adolescents, even those who did not participate in these practices or were not seemingly affected by it (mostly boys), this culture of Instagram was often described as one of the main culprits of the negative effects of social media on the health and well-being of young people, especially in relation to body image concerns, loneliness, stress and anxiousness. Consequently, many of the adolescents abstained from sharing content on their public profiles or only shared content such as stories that cannot publicly be liked or commented on. In contrast, the private spheres of social media were understood as consisting of a finite and selected group of people, usually close friends and people with similar interests, and consisted mainly of direct communication (e.g., on Snapchat and Messenger), group chats, stories posted to a selected group of recipients (referred to as a 'private story'), facilitating sports (mainly through Facebook) and spontaneous gatherings, hobbies and gaming (mainly through Discord). All of which were, similar to previous research, associated with the positive elements of social media such as social support, amusement, sense of belonging and intimacy (Best et al., 2014; Davis, 2012; Krogh, 2022a; Oh et al., 2014).

### *Traffic and Reach*

Even though the private spheres of social media were often associated with the positive attributes, for some adolescents, particularly younger participants, a large quantity of friends and a high frequency of communication via these platforms was sometimes viewed as an achievement in itself and as a sign of popularity and social status (MacIsaac et al., 2018). Having a high number of friends meant receiving an abundance of snaps and messages throughout the day, which could be viewed as being in high demand, popular and successful, representing a different kind of achievement than the curation of idealized self-presentations online. As one boy explained:

Beki (9th-grade boy): Take Snapchat for instance. It has a function called 'Quick Add': It's a list of 30–40 people. What I used to do was just continue to add them all, even if I didn't know who they were. And then I would send them 'streak' and they would send 'streak' back. And because of this, I had streaks with many people. So, every time I opened my phone, I would have ten new messages, so it looked like I was very popular.

As exemplified by this quote, the adolescents had multiple ways of expanding their network and reach on social media, such as ‘Quick Add’ on Snapchat, giving each other ‘shoutouts’ and using platforms such as YoBo, F3 and OmeTV to make new friends. The adolescents most concerned with popularity and social status also expressed fewer reservations about meeting new people online. However, while online popularity could be viewed as an achievement, staying connected and current with a large number of friends was described by some adolescents as stressful and as something that causes a loss of sleep and an increase in anxiety regarding the potential loss of social status. Some adolescents, however, were sceptical about those who were too eager to expand their networks for the sake of appearing popular (mostly the older boys in the study):

Nathan (9th-grade boy): They’re like, ‘I have 1,000 friends, but I only know about ten of them, so I am super cool and that’s why I can only talk to you for about one minute’.

Furthermore, many of the adolescents had negative experiences in getting to know people online and gave concrete, personal examples of receiving verbal abuse, threats and, in the case of almost all the girls, unwanted sexual requests and advances.

### *Sweet Girls and ‘Feely’ Boys*

Previous youth research has highlighted gender differences in expectations and self-presentations on social media (Ruckel & Hill, 2017). In this study, almost all the adolescents described how girls, in general, are more active and more invested in their public social media presence:

Ella (9th-grade girl): I think there are higher expectations for girls to look pretty and to post pretty pictures of themselves on Instagram. And the boys don’t post anything. Or if they do, it’s just something random, like bad pictures and stuff. There are no expectations for them.

Many girls, particularly girls from more resourceful areas, felt pressure to present polished pictures of themselves that, similar to the findings of MacIsaac et al. (2018), are intended to present themselves as sweet, happy, welcoming and attractive. In that sense, many of the girls felt a great pressure to comply with notions of popular femininity. While the boys’ public social media content primarily revolved around documentation of extraordinary happenings, such as social events, mastering new skills and acquiring new material possessions, the girls of the study were expected to be more extraordinary within themselves, especially in their own physical appearance and charisma. For the same reason, girls had a higher tendency to post pictures solely of themselves, while the boys more often were represented as sociable, active and prosperous, without appearing to be a ‘feely boy’:

Aiden (9th-grade boy): Well, boys and girls can’t just post the same kind of pictures. Boys don’t just post a ‘feely’ selfie taken during the ‘golden hour’ [when the sunlight is optimal for photos].

‘Feely boys’ were often described as representations of boys being too serious, self-centred and self-obsessed in their social media presence. ‘Feely boys’ were, on the

one hand, associated with feminine representations that are more accepted for girls. However, ‘feely’ pictures were also associated with urban and lower-class masculinity, that is, serious looks, presenting gang signs or appearing tough (Jensen, 2010), while simultaneously appearing too obsessed and pleased with oneself. These boys ‘spend slightly more time in the streets than we do’ (Beki, 9th-grade boy), as one boy explained it. For many adolescents, particularly those from more resourceful areas, these forms of self-presentation were considered laughable and distasteful:

Eleanor (7th-grade girl): The boys mostly post pictures where they do all sorts of weird gang signs. Girls are more about looking cute, in perfect sunlight and laughing with their friends. Boys don’t do that. They try to look cool and do gang signs. But it’s really just tacky (laughs).

While the boys recognized and acknowledged a culture of self-centred idealized and positive representations on social media, many were less inclined to partake in this culture due to either the feminine or the lower-class masculine nature of certain boys’ self-presentations. Similarly, as documented in previous research (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015), certain representations of girls were at higher risk of being viewed as vulgar and distasteful, such as appearing overly sexual, because ‘it’s not something good schoolgirls do’, as one girl, Ellie, 9th grade, explained. Within the realm of the public digital sphere, the girls felt expectations to appear happy, cute, healthy, smiling and welcoming but also attractive in a specific way that is ‘both sweet and hot at the same time’ (Nora, 8th-grade girl). However, for the girls, there was a fine line between attractive and sexual, which was made clear during the interviews:

Riley (9th-grade girl): If a girl posts a picture of her in a bikini, then the other girls are quick to say ‘oh, she is such a “hoe”’ and ‘she just tries to show off’. She will be judged very quickly even though it’s actually quite confident to post a picture wearing a bikini.

Boys’ photos, on the other hand, were much less likely to be considered too sexual or to be socially sanctioned for their social media practices, in general. The girls gave multiple examples of these double standards regarding pictures, particularly sanctions from other girls, thus highlighting this fine line. Some girls even gave examples of identical pictures being posted on a girl’s and a boy’s profile and receiving very different responses.

### *The Allocation of Digital Recognition*

Many social media platforms have quantifiable currencies of recognition, such as followers, likes and comments (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; MacIsaac et al., 2018). These quantifiably currencies of recognition could be used to evaluate achievements (or lack hereof). Some adolescents, mainly girls and, more often, girls from more resourceful areas, acknowledged how this sort of recognition could influence their mood, self-evaluation and self-perception, especially in relation to their physical appearance and attractiveness:

Amelia (8th-grade girl): If you have received likes on your previous pictures but not as many on the one you just posted, then they (i.e., followers) must think that this picture is

prettier than that picture (...). You start to overthink whether you should delete the picture or not. Like, 'What should I do?' and 'Do I like this picture, or do I think it's ugly?' You start to become super insecure about what you just posted.

Furthermore, while not directly affected by likes, comments and followers, many adolescents explained how online recognition heavily affected some of their fellow adolescents, particularly among the girls who were often singled out as those who were most likely to be affected by a lack of likes and comments. Because platforms like Instagram were often viewed as a polished presence to the outside world (Hogan, 2010), having pictures with multiple likes and comments becomes a way to demonstrate peer satisfaction and validation of achievements. Consequently, fewer likes than expected could provoke a feeling of one's polished presence cracking, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and self-criticism, particularly among the girls. In contrast, many boys stated that likes and followers did not influence their mood or self-perception at all. When discussing the negative sides of social media, boys more frequently pointed out how social media can escalate and expand conflicts and facilitate bullying and how the anonymity of certain platforms can encourage strong language.

In relation to recognition of achievements, the adolescents also highlighted certain spillover effects between the digital and physical arenas. First, how the number of likes, followers and comments tended to be influenced by popularity outside of social media. 'If you are very popular, you will automatically get more likes' (Stella, 9th-grade girl). The power of perceived popularity (Lease et al., 2002) tended to influence adolescents' peer relations both offline and online, as a high social status at school and within the local area was usually reflected in the amount of recognition received on social media. Similarly, while the adolescents mainly saw negative comments directly below the pictures of influencers and other celebrities with a high number of followers, they would mostly be made aware of failures to comply with the culture of social media (e.g., having made an overly sexual, tacky, unflattering or otherwise inappropriate post) by overhearing slander or comments at school:

Aiden (9th-grade boy): When it comes to pictures or something like that, you have to be very careful what you post because people are quick to give an annoying comment when you arrive at school.

Slander and condescending remarks, as Elias and Scotson (1994) noted, can be used to position others as outsiders. Among the adolescents, the fear of slandering or social sanctions outside of social media could cause feelings of anxiousness about making mistakes in their digital self-presentations, such as missing small flaws in pictures. Moreover, some girls, mainly younger participants from high-resource areas, gave examples of feeling pressured to complement certain popular individuals' posts due to their social status and high number of followers. Failure to comply could result in false rumours being spread and ostracism. Boys, on the other hand, were less likely to experience the same pressure to comply with these norms.

### *Digital Tribunals*

While a high number of adolescents mentioned digital bullying as a negative aspect of social media, very few had experienced or witnessed it. They did, however,

describe borderline bullying practices, which herein is termed as *digital tribunals*. A digital tribunal is here used as a concept to describe achievement demands, digital recognition and peer evaluations in places outside of the realm of adolescents' own personal profiles. The term digital tribunal distinguishes between what the adolescents view as bullying practices and what they view as simply part of digital youth culture. These tribunals included things such as anonymously controlled local gossip groups or local 'celebrity' groups, where adolescents compete against one another for votes to be included in a group of 'local celebrities' and to determine the hierarchy of local fame. Digital tribunals also included practices such as 'Smash or Pass', where two or more adolescents post on their stories on Snapchat that they are doing 'Smash or Pass'. Other adolescents then send pictures of themselves, which the adolescents in charge of the 'Smash or Pass' subsequently post in their own stories along with a verdict on whether they would 'smash' (i.e., find attractive) or 'pass' (i.e., find not attractive). As the adolescents explained, both boys and girls could initiate and submit pictures for 'Smash or Pass'. Likewise, the verdicts for all participants were made available to everyone:

Avery (7th-grade girl): It sucks if they write 'pass' on you because you might think that he is pretty or something like that, and then he writes 'pass' on you.

Luna (7th-grade girl): And then if he has just 'smashed' your best friend. Ouch!

While these digital tribunals were associated with achievement demands much in the same ways as self-presentations within their own personal public profiles, the lack of control, the larger audiences and the anonymity of these digital tribunals could, at times, strengthen the negative effects of not complying with the experienced achievement demands of social media. Particularly within the local gossip groups or other 'cycles of gossip', actions outside of social media (e.g., parties and school) would be evaluated and judged by a far wider audience, resulting in feelings of anxiousness and being constantly surveilled. Controversially, a high number of adolescents did not view these practices as digital bullying but rather as part of digital youth culture.

## Discussion

By using the framework of the achievement imperative to study how social media affects early adolescents, this study highlights some important findings that lead to a better understanding of this distinct feature of today's youth. As shown by the findings, the achievement demands of social media were mostly associated with the public spheres and primarily revolved around the ability to present idealized and polished versions of oneself, particularly in the form of physical attractiveness, singular lifestyles and a flourishing social life along with gaining digital recognition for one's achievements (likes, followers and comments). These findings align with previous research that characterize social media platforms as sites for curation of idealized and positive self-presentations (Banjanin et al., 2015; Burnette et al., 2017; Marengo et al., 2018; Reckwitz, 2020; Woods & Scott, 2016). Similarly, the fast pace of social media content meant that engaging with these public spheres often required continuous hard work, time and energy (Krüger, 2019) because failure to

comply with the culture of these public spheres could result in the loss of followers and social status. As Rosa (2010) argues in relation to achievement and recognition in today's accelerating society, during the fast pace of everyday life, advantageous positions become less stable and recognition becomes more about continuously being able to achieve, that is, continuously updating one's profile, managing one's network and being constantly available. Similarly, Reckwitz (2020) argued that the competition for recognition intensifies on social media due to the vast amount of new content being produced. Consequently, the adolescents, particularly the girls, often described these public social media spheres as the most demanding, most time consuming and most likely to result in feelings of stress, inadequacy, anxiety and loneliness. For the same reason, a relatively high number of the adolescents abstained from sharing content on their public profiles.

Moreover, by applying the achievement imperative as the framework of the study, the findings show how achievement demands were also associated with situations where the adolescents were presented and evaluated outside of their own profiles (here termed digital tribunals), and, mainly among the youngest participants, the quantity and frequency of communication with friends. Both of these may also cause the adolescents to experience feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and stress—feelings often highlighted within the achievement imperative as the reason for the decline in youth mental health (Eckersley, 2011; Katznelson et al., 2021; Madsen, 2021; Petersen, 2016). As this study shows, a theoretical framework focussing on achievements and pressure to comply with achievement demands holds great potential for identifying and understanding how certain elements of social media can negatively affect young people. Likewise, the theoretical framework is also relevant in separating the potential harmful effects of social media from the positive ones.

Furthermore, the achievement imperative has also been framed as particularly influential among girls and the female body (Dilling & Petersen, 2021; Madsen, 2021). As this study also found, compared to boys, girls, particularly those from more resourceful areas, were expected to a much greater extent to present the extraordinary within themselves, their charisma and their physical appearance, often appearing solo in photos. These expectations of how gendered idealized self-presentations should be curated within the public spheres of social media could potentially heighten the risk of critical introspection, self-criticism, feelings of inadequacy and anxiousness about making mistakes among girls. At the same time, girls were also most likely to be affected by a lack of online recognition, experience social sanctions for their social media use (e.g., slander) and experience feelings of stress and anxiousness about inability to comply with achievement demands. In contrast, boys' inclinations to present extraordinary happenings, such as group photos, places and material possessions, are less likely to be viewed as personal in the same way and, therefore, less likely to result in these feelings to the same extent. A reason for these differences may have to do with the connections between class, gender and classification, as argued by Skeggs (1997). This study found that self-obsessed pictures of boys are often viewed as either feminine or displays of lower-class masculinity. Similarly, displays of sexuality among girls were equally likely to result in social sanctions and middle-class *othering* (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Skeggs, 1997). These findings indicate how classed and gendered classifications are important factors to consider when studying the achievement imperative in relation to the social media practices of youth.

However, as not all areas of social media are equally associated with achievement ideals and demands, this study highlights some important factors to consider when studying the effects of social media on young peoples' health and well-being. First, research into the effects of social media should exercise caution about broad and unambiguous characterizations of the platforms, as such characterizations potentially risk ignoring important nuances. Second, it is important to be aware of both the positive and negative aspects of social media as well as the different platforms' functionalities and cultures. As the findings of this study highlight, it is important to take into account the different platforms and their abilities to control their potential audiences when examining the practices and effects of social media on young people (Bollmer, 2018; Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). Finally, it is important to note how the use of social media by early adolescents is structured by social categories such as gender and class. To further our understanding, it is important that future research take these factors into account when studying the positive and negative aspects of social media in relation to the mental health of youth.

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