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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

"Yes, I'm Worth It": The Economy of Girls' Photo Rating in Social Network Sites

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In the wake of a moral panic concerning a Facebook group that invited teenagers to post and rate their photos, this article draws on 6 focus groups conducted with teenage girls to explore how participants reflect upon the economy of visibility in such rating games. Analyzing the girls' discourse, we find that they identify a correlation between sexually explicit images and high ratings, and that they use both psychological and economic frames to interpret this relationship. We suggest that ironically, the quantified explicitness of Liking crystalizes for the girls the price tag for each choice that they make, the double standard that underlies this economy—and their ability to tease and to challenge it.

Keywords: Girls, Economy of Visibility, Rating, Social Network Sites, Focus Groups, Selfies, Like Button, Photography.

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Throughout the long history of art and the shorter histories of more popular forms such as cinema and advertising, "the painters and spectator-owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women" (Berger, 1972, p. 63). Men act and women appear, and as Berger has famously noted, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (1972, p. 47). Beyond women's "to-be-looked-at-ness," the cinematic gaze of the male director, protagonist, and viewer build "the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (Mulvey, 1989, p. 25). Recent technological developments seem to undermine this age-old division of labor. Using cell phones with front-facing cameras on the one hand, and social networks such as Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram on the other, women and girls appear to own the means of cultural production today. They can now photograph themselves and circulate their pictures, seemingly bypassing male/adult supervision.

Popular discussions about the meaning of this presumed challenge to established power relations express deep misgivings over any assumptions of immediate

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empowerment. Senft and Baym (2015) document a host of news reports that construct teens who take and publish photos of themselves as narcissistic, addicted and even psychotic. As is often the case in such moral panics, the reports shift the focus from the social context that gave rise to these practices, to their perpetrators' arguably inappropriate (to the point of dangerous and pathological) behavior (Cohen, 1972; Drotner, 1992). Indeed, the starting point for this study is a news report titled "Revealing Pictures of Under-aged Girls Parade on Facebook" (Harpaz-Eini, 2013), which disclosed that Israeli teens, and girls in particular, published images of themselves in a group on Facebook and "called upon the opposite sex to rate their pictures." Adhering to the norms of moral panic discourse, this report, too, invokes the spectacle of scandal by calling attention to young girls' willingness to be objectified when they appear to voluntarily enter a competition in which their visual image is up for rating, overlooking the fact that women and girls' bodies are and have been rated in numerous cultural arenas, from beauty pageants to makeover reality shows (Banet-Weiser, 1999; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006). In other words, the report expresses moral outrage over what takes place in this new, presumably technologically advanced and therefore inadequately supervised arena, while decontextualizing it from the patriarchal matrix in which such photos are and have been pinned "up for grabs" for years (Senft, 2008).

For different reasons, feminist scholars are also reluctant to embrace these new practices. In a critique of postfeminism that draws on the pioneering work of McRobbie and Gill, some feminists ask whether girls' photographing and disseminating self-portraits on social networks can be theorized as agency (Senft & Baym, 2015, p. 1600), others debate whether it is an expression of liberation and pleasure (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013, p. 306), and yet others ponder whether it registers measures of self-esteem (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 90). Ringrose and her colleagues study U.K. teens' practices of sexting—the creating and sharing of sexually suggestive naked or relatively naked body images through digital media, specifically Blackberry messages. Analyzing teens' discourse, they find that images of girls' bodies have exchange value for boys: the number of images boys collected and could show their friends was a measure of their popularity or "rating" (2013, p. 319). Thus while the girls adopted the postfeminist idea that being asked for an image of their body carries value, they were conscious of the sexual double standard that was involved in the circulation of their images, and at the same time denigrated those girls who sent them.

Banet-Weiser (2014) discusses YouTube videos in which U.S. teenage girls ask their viewers to respond to their question, "Am I pretty or ugly?" Banet-Weiser historicizes this practice, situating it in a neoliberal economy of visibility that privileges an investment in the visible self, which is "constantly scrutinized and evaluated by the mechanism of social media" (2014, p. 89). This visible, evaluated self is in turn encouraged by the self-empowerment discourse of postfeminism. The videos then function in a cyclical way, at once indicators of low self-esteem and tools for achieving self-esteem through participation in the neoliberal economy of visibility. Thus, both

studies highlight the ways in which girls' self-images "serve up bodies as commodities" (2014, p. 89) through the respective media platforms they examine, suggesting that the relationship between access to the means of production and subversive output is more complicated than it seems.

In this article, we seek to shed more light on this relationship by considering the ways in which the postfeminist, neoliberal economy of visibility structures, and is structured by, the architecture of contemporary social network sites; and the ways in which girls make sense of this architecture. We foreground three elements: the Like button (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013), the immediate and quantified nature of the responses that are generated (Illouz, 2007), and their public visibility in relation to the posted image (Manovich, 2009). Attending to girls' discussions about self-images, our analysis allows us to highlight the counterintuitive value of this by-now taken-for-granted "cultural interface" (Manovich, 2009) for girls' constructions of self and society. It suggests that girls' taking and posting pictures of themselves; the responses they immediately receive; and the explicit, quantified, visible structure of these practices, offer girls concrete tools for understanding and acting in particular ways in an evolving economy of visibility.

Girls in Western society learn from an early age that they are evaluated according to their physical appearance (Wolf, 1991). Consumer products as well as the texts promoting them encourage girls to cultivate their appearance and to externalize their sexuality (Douglas, 2010). At the same time, girls' appearance preoccupies public discourse and they are continuously reprimanded for showing too much or too little of their bodies (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2006; Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). Social network sites (SNSs) provide a concrete (though virtual) playing field for acting out these tensions. Choosing profile pictures involves objectification and evaluation of the body relative to other network users (Illouz, 2007; Ringrose, 2011) — Facebook itself was initially conceived for picture comparison among students. Within this context, girls need to navigate between the realization that sexual display is an effective way to receive attention (Siibak, 2009; Sveningsson, 2009), and the recognition that this requires caution and adherence to strict social norms (Ringrose et al., 2013). Local, ad hoc resolutions of these contradictions, in turn, influence the "shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of the gender ideology" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275).

Girl Studies mirror these debates as they adopt two competing constructions of girls — one that is anxious over "girls at risk" and another that celebrates postfeminist "girl power" (Aapola, Gonick, & Harris, 2005; Gonick, Renold, Ringrose, & Weems, 2009; Hijazi-Omari & Ribak, 2008). Rather than take a side in this debate, we seek to reflect upon the notions of "risk" and "power" as they are enacted in girls' daily SNS practices. Thus, we study the symbolic exchange through which the girls negotiate the posting and rating of their body images in SNSs (Schwartz, 2010; Skeggs, 2005), attentive to the ways in which the architecture of web 2.0 in general and SNSs in particular (boyd & Ellison, 2007) is implicated in their practices.

Method

Discussion groups are well suited for research involving young people in general and girls in particular, since they allow participants to interact with each other and enable a bottom-up approach (Darbyshire, MacDougall, & Schiller, 2005). In this spirit, we attended one meeting in each of six different girl-empowerment municipal programs, which convene weekly in various cities in Israel. The discussions were approved by the municipal youth coordinator and took place in the presence of the group's counselor during the second half of 2013. The first researcher joined one of the group's meetings, which was devoted to SNS image production and evaluation, and asked about practices of image posting and rating. This setting was designed not only to gain insight into the groups' norms and practices, but also to minimize potential awkwardness while benefiting from the girls' previous acquaintance.

We conducted six discussion groups: G-1 though G-5 in July 2013 and G-6 in January 2014. The groups were comprised of 4–15 girls aged 15–17 and each discussion lasted approximately 90 minutes. We told the participants that the discussion was part of a study, and they expressed their consent to participate knowing that it was not mandatory and that they could leave at any time. We recorded and transcribed the discussions maintaining absolute confidentiality, removing identifying details, and changing the names of the participants.

We began by asking how participants choose a suitable profile picture, and which photograph attracts most comments. We then asked about uploading photographs to SNS in general and specifically about their activity in "The New Critiques, Ratings, Statuses, 'Love Me,'" — Critiques in the girls' parlance — a public Facebook group that was featured in the news and was extremely popular at the time. Finally, we presented some quotes from newspapers and television programs, as well as comments from previous discussion groups, in order to stimulate the conversation. We encouraged the participants to describe their practices and to share incidents that occurred to them or to their friends, and the conversation elicited enthusiastic, passionate reactions.

In what follows we analyze the girls' discourse concerning photos they post and Like on SNSs (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). We begin by acknowledging the pervasiveness of appearance rating and the ways in which it informs the girls' SNS practices. We then examine the borders of appropriate behavior: how Liking can become threatening, and how it can be manipulated. We conclude by reflecting upon the meaning of posting and rating self-images in girls' economy of visibility, suggesting that Liking and its immediate, quantified, public nature throw gendered norms of representation into sharp relief in ways that may be complicated, unexpected, and ironically instructive.

Evaluating images

Facebook groups like The New Critiques, Ratings, Statuses, and "Love Me" offer an enhanced experience of the rating logic that typically structures the Internet in more implicit ways (Hakanen, 2002; Hearn, 2010). The combination of images,

Like buttons, and visible responses promotes a cyclical learning process whereby "success"—the number of positive responses an image receives—elucidates the ingredients for producing an image that would be "successful." How do girls find their way in this environment? How do they create and post a picture that will receive good rating? The answers were not simple:

> Mor: Every girl is pretty in her own way, why should she care how many [Likes] this one got, or how many the other one got?
>
> Shiran: Right; there was this girl, maybe you saw it too, who put up a profile picture while looking at the mirror. She got about 180 Likes a day … It's like … What do you think about *that*?
>
> Mor: If they liked her picture?
>
> Shiran: Even *she* admitted that they liked it because of you-know-what …
>
> Mor: [presses her breasts to each other] This way …
>
> Shiran: I have a picture this way too, so what?
>
> Mor: But not this way! You can see her entire butt through her shorts, and she took a picture of herself looking in the mirror!
>
> Shiran: But it's her choice whether or not she wants to be a slut … She can do whatever she wants! This is a democratic country; she can do whatever she wants! (G-2)

The girls distance themselves from self-presentations they define as "slutty," which pertains first and foremost to the outfit the photographed girl chose to wear ("You can see her entire butt through her shorts") as well as improper gestures—pushing up the breasts or gazing at the viewer through the mirror. Having agreed upon the interpretation of the picture as slutty, they argued about the broader meaning of a slutty self-presentation: Was posting a slutty picture an act of free civic expression ("This is a democratic country! She can do whatever she wants!")? Was it a transaction, in which a girl could cash in the capital available at her disposal ("she got about 180 Likes a day")? Or was this yet another case of exploitation, where a girl played right into the hands of the boys ("they liked it because of you-know-what")?

The girls' hesitation echoes contemporary feminist debates. While their preoccupation with their appearance can be seen as a form of patriarchal oppression, it can also be interpreted as an expression of free choice and sexual "democratization," which is not necessarily the result of false consciousness (Buckingham, 2011; Duits & van Zoonen, 2006; Hasinoff, 2014). From this perspective, the girls challenge the forced choice between strict modesty and the heavily priced violation of its rules (Kandiyoti, 1988). McRobbie (2009) calls attention to the conflicting messages directed at women and girls in a "postfeminist" society where feminist ideas about empowerment, voice, or choice are converted into commodities. In this economy, the female body—especially that of girls who are deprived of other resources—is deployed as capital (Herring & Zelenkauskaite, 2009).

What, then, is the symbolic exchange value that informs the construction of girls' body images on social network sites (Ringrose et al., 2013)? How do the girls construct themselves as "attractive"? One of them, Michal, explained that a good profile picture is "a photo in which I look really hot, like, *really* hot!" (G-3). Adi observed: "Listen, pictures that get a lot of Likes show a lot of boobs" (G-2). As the responses explicate the value of revealing pictures, this logic informs even those images that resist it. Schwartz (2010) noted that Israeli teenagers in social network sites carefully justified their visual positions and actions. In a similar manner, girls in the discussion groups ridiculed girls who took pictures of themselves in swimsuits in wintertime, or in their room instead of at the beach:

> It's normal during the summer, but in winter it is not. In the winter it's like: "Oh, how I miss summer"—I hate those girls [who do that]! "I'm missing summer" [imitating girls who pose with a swimsuit in the winter]. Miss—[but] don't take pictures like that in front of the mirror. (Sapir, G-6)

In this interpretation, posting pictures in swimsuits is legitimate and acceptable when it is "authentic," documenting an actual event with friends at the beach. By contrast, a staged, decontextualized portrayal of oneself in a swimsuit is critiqued as provocative:

> Let's say we're sitting at the beach and like, "let's take a beach-photo," just because we were there. People could say "they posted a picture of themselves in swimsuits so that everyone would see their tits," and such. Now, it could be one of two things: It's summer, and it could just be a picture because we're having fun so let's smile [to the camera] for a minute; but it could also be a picture of like: "Look, I'm standing in my room posing such that my nipple is almost out, oops, by mistake … [mocking] and I just happened to take a picture with my phone. By chance, I really didn't know this is what I felt like doing right now but it just happened, so … Like my picture!" (Jordan, G-6)

The girls appreciated the effort required for producing a sexually attractive self-presentation and the calculated moves taken in order to create a mature, feminine look, and related to it by humorously imitating familiar situations:

> Ella: Girls who don't have a life go and lie on the beach, like to be photographed … as if they were models.
>
> Goni: [Or] wear heels around the neighborhood in order to be photographed. "I just happened to wake up this morning like this, with my makeup on." (G-3)

In this construction, "girls who don't have a life" create a fake impression of "life" as it should be lived. Taking pictures of themselves in the same places that girls who supposedly do have a life go to, they appear to differ only in intent: They go there in order to be photographed, whereas the girls who have a life go there because they *have a life*. But whereas "inauthentic" pictures were a laughing matter for the girls to joke about, revealing pictures were a serious matter since those involved the boys.

The norms for self-presentation in this context are based on the familiar logic and exchange rate, whereby a provocative picture gets noted — that is, rewarded:

> There are girls who post images of themselves to Critiques with all of "that area" out [points at her breasts] … and the boys pay attention and respond with millions of comments saying "phone number? Address?" and stuff like that, and the girls just go along with it, it's shocking, it's disgusting, [if] you're a 15-year-old girl, you need to protect your dignity! (Shirley, G-2)

The girls' conversation about the aesthetics of self-images concerns the gestures and body parts, the camera angle, as well as the props and the location that combine to produce a nice and appropriate picture. Yet clearly this aesthetic is informed by the postfeminist economy of visibility. Thus the evaluation of images is predicated on the significant positive correlation that the girls identify between sexual presentation of self and male attention, which appears on the screen publicly as the number of Likes each particular photo received.

Risky images

The exchange value of the girls' pictures is negotiated within a patriarchal context that assumes a double standard in relation to sexuality and the body of women and girls (Hasinoff, 2014). The girls raise this in their discussions and reflect upon the tension between sexual self-presentation and the price girls pay for it. One of the girls laid out the rules of the game:

> Like, today? In our very uncivilized society? So yes, there is this thing where if a guy sleeps with many girls and takes a picture of it he's considered "the man" [in a deep voice]. And a girl who does the exact same thing? She's a slut … Exactly the same thing, the exact same act. (Naomi, G-6)

The girls for the most part accept the terms offered in this "patriarchal deal" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275) whereby a girl's sexual image can be used against her and in order to shame her (Renold & Ringrose, 2011). Furthermore, the girls seem to accept the positive value that a modest self-presentation carries:

> Naomi: There are boys who like modest girls.
>
> Sapir: True …
>
> Naomi: The boys I talk to at school, eventually all say they just want someone who is a good girl, for marriage.
>
> Jordan: That when they bring her home, their mom wouldn't say "who is that trashy girl you brought over?" Most boys, though, do look for sex, like, for the "easy to get" girl. But on the other hand, as his girlfriend? He'd want the good girl, someone who'd keep herself only for him.
>
> Naomi: Yeah, that's right. (G-6)

The prevalent norms require that the "good girl" maintains a respectable and impeccable reputation, and protects herself from inappropriate sexuality (Holland,

Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998). It is the girls' responsibility to selectively choose and monitor the pictures they and their friends post, as this lesson illustrates:

> Noa: There was this story about a girl from [town] who was with her boyfriend, 26-year-old grown-up girl who had this boyfriend for several years and they took videos of themselves during ummm … and it went around from one group to the next on WhatsApp … And now this girl changed her name and moved to another city, and started a whole new life. And this means that it doesn't happen just to kids. He was 30-something and she was 26 and they've been together for something like 4 years.
>
> Q: But in the pictures he appeared too, so why only she felt ashamed?
>
> Noa: Because he's a man, he's proud of himself for what he did … A man can do whatever he wants and no one would say anything … his friends will be proud of it too. (G-4)

The girls refer as a matter of fact to the threat that a girl's identity and body be marked as shameful and "slutty." Correspondingly, they embrace an essentialist view whereby girls are always looking for a serious relationship, while boys seek different types of relationships at different stages of their lives. As Ella explained: "Girls of all ages seem to want something serious … boys are more looking for something to lay a hand on" (G-3). And so girls must stay on guard:

> Shira: It's as though you go to the beach and say "I don't wear sunscreen on but I'm not supposed to get burnt, it's not my fault if I get sunburn." So, you'll get burned.
>
> Tali: You compare it to guys, as if …
>
> Shira: But why do you have to limit yourself and he doesn't …
>
> Tali: She could want attention but she doesn't want anyone to touch her … What we're trying to say is, that men should get rid of this rape culture, [as though] it's okay to rape a girl and that it's her fault …
>
> Zohar: You know why we're fighting and shouting about this right now? Because both sides got it right. *She's* right that now it's considered her fault, but *she's* right that it shouldn't be that way. We can continue fighting over this for years. (G-5)

The exchange begins with the suggestion to interpret the modesty regime as a natural force that one can cautiously reckon with and avoid its harms. But the girls question this metaphor: They challenge both the double standard ("Why do you have to limit yourself and he doesn't?") and the implication that presence is tied to vulnerability ("She could want attention but she doesn't want anyone to touch her"). "It shouldn't be that way," they reject the double standard and protest over the norm of blaming the victim. In the same spirit, the girls contest the patriarchal logic that ties girls' damaged reputation to the men who are close to them:

> Sapir: About a year ago, Jordan posted a picture of her and her friend in swimsuits. What do you think her friend's boyfriend said?

Jordan: It wasn't in a swimsuit. It was like her profile, just from an angle that you could see her boobs.

Sapir: You could see only a tiny bit. Anyway, he just went on raging, he didn't agree to have that picture posted and demanded she erases it and stuff, he was really angry that his girlfriend's picture showed her tits. It is primitive.

Naomi: In short, he knows what it does to others [men]. (G-6)

This account is not alone. The girls referred to other girls' brothers and boyfriends who asked them to remove posts that may harm their reputation. Do the girls ridicule men's ownership practices? Do they take them for granted, as given ("He knows what it does to others")? What the girls seem to agree upon is that the way to make boys comprehend the balancing act required for attaining an appropriate presentation of self, let alone the consequences of a wrong move, is to have them imagine that they owned the girl. In other words, for a boy to empathize with a girls' predicament, he has to conjure up a situation in which the promiscuous or victimized girl in the picture "were your sister" (Avia, G-6). As Sapir explained: "And then suddenly he realized! He suddenly understood he was wrong, like, he suddenly thought about his sister and realized it was wrong" (G-6).

The status of notorious girls, who cultivate a provocative persona, offers a concrete example of the patriarchal deal and price tag of sexual self-presentation. McRobbie refers to young women who adopt a sexual pornographically inspired look as "phallic girls" (2009, p. 84). This image is epitomized in the glamor model that makes her living posing naked for the soft-porn pages of magazines and newspapers, embodying a patriarchal position like "one of the guys" while representing a hyper-eroticized object of desire (Egan, 2013; Renold & Ringrose, 2011). Such a bold and successful self-presentation of young women is not commonplace in Israel, and the girls kept bringing up the local case of Chen Tal:

Shirly: There's this girl, what's her name? Chen Tal … [All: Chen Tal!]

Mor: She's not a girl, she's 25.

Shirly: She's 25, she does PR for clubs in Tel-Aviv …

Sivan: She takes pictures of herself …

Shirly: She doesn't care …

Q: What do you mean "she doesn't care"?

Shirly: She just doesn't … [uploading a naked photo of Chen Tal from her Facebook page. All: Let me see!].

Sivan: There were a lot of items about her on [television program] Night Tube and she said that she really doesn't care if they make a sex symbol out of her.

Adi: I don't think there's anyone who doesn't know her [laughter]. (G-2)

Chen Tal's conduct and especially the calculated nature of her fame and success, her celebrity status, and the fact that she began to appear on television and convert her

reputation into economic value, are presented by the girls as a smart management of the assets at her disposal. However, the contradiction Lemish (2003) identified more than a decade ago in girls' discourse about sexual and successful women remains: The girls respect Chen Tal as a self-made celebrity; at the same time, they are uncomfortable with the way she "photographs herself" with outspoken disregard to the modesty regime they uphold. Like former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, Chen Tal is a "phallic girl" they can reflect upon as they consider their relation to patriarchy and the price they pay when they accept the "deal" it offers them. The girls are fascinated by the alternative Chen Tal presents and by the fact that "she doesn't care": "She doesn't care what people say about her"; "She doesn't mind appearing naked"; "She doesn't care if they make a sex symbol out of her."

The girls pay close attention to the repressive responses that challenging images receive and to the ways in which such threats are deployed in order to reaffirm the patriarchal deal. They even seem to appreciate the effective, "manly" manner in which these threats are dealt with. But in the hall of fame of women who inspire the girls, those who challenge or at least tinker with the normative propriety play an important role.

Playing with liking

The girls were quite aware of the public concern and denigration of teens' online activity in general and their posting and responding practices in particular. Jordan explained why, despite this critique, SNSs remain attractive and enjoyable: "I admit that it boosts your ego when you get more … yeah, people enjoy getting more Likes, you feel like people saw the picture you bothered to post … It's like a sign of reassurance" (G-6). As though responding to the popular panic over their being objects of rating, the girls constructed competition, initiative, and humiliation of other boys and girls as forms of play and sources of pleasure: "I always Like boys, rarely girls. It's a kind of a Like contest, for example with your [girl] friend, so that she doesn't have more Likes than you do" (Eden, G-1). Rating enables girls to experiment, network, and simply act in the virtual playing filed. We suggest that it is the very explicitness of this game that allows the girls to frame their participation in ways that undermine moralistic concerns for their presumed well-being: "Like, what do I care? I'll post my body … I'm hot" (Adi, G-2).

The girls attempt to fulfill their desire to receive many Likes and attain high rating and visibility in several ways. The most basic tactic consists of begging for Likes. A more degrading tactic involved compelling others — or "pledgicizing," as they neologized in Hebrew — to Like your status in response to an unavoidable pledge:

> Shirley: They're *so* desperate [friends who compel others to Like their posts].
>
> Michal: When they write it, I'm like, "I pledge to *not* Like your status" …
>
> Shirley: There are also those who don't pledgisize, they do it in other ways. So, they write: "if you love your mother — Like my status."
>
> Mor: That's right! It's the ugliest thing.

Michal: To force you.

Shirley: "If you love god, Like my status" … (G-2)

One of the girls referred to another Like coercion: On Holocaust Memorial Day she read a post inviting whoever hates Hitler to Like the status. A related tactic for garnering Likes involves posting a picture and writing condolences bereaving the death of a beloved person. Lastly, the girls mentioned with contempt the use of Facebook auto-Like software, which generates automatic Likes to and from those who install it. Aware of the quantitative indication of the number of Likes or responses a photo receives, the girls engage in experimentation, comparing and avenging one other:

Michal: Once I posted in Critiques, I did this to a girl in my class, just because she was always making fun of me that I post pictures and don't get any Likes. So, she posted a photo of herself to Critiques and got 5 Likes. I posted a photo to Critiques and got about 60 Likes, after only a few minutes …

Mor: She did this on *purpose* …

Michal: I did it on purpose … I posted my picture on purpose … I can't stand this girl, so I did it to spite her.

Q: Why, what does she do?

Michal: She thinks she's better than everybody else, so I showed her that there are people who are better than her. (G-2)

Between rivals, competition can take more explicit forms. Rachel disclosed that she had written: "Fatso, I can post a picture of *myself* in a bikini but you can't!" (G-1). Competitiveness also finds expression in discussions about other girl's pathetic attempts to be liked. So Naomi mentioned: "So, on my WhatsApp group? It's a group of friends of mine, so oftentimes they'd post pictures of other girls—pictures that other girls posted to Facebook—and they'd write, 'what was she thinking?', [we] gossip about them" (G-6). As Illouz observed (2007, p. 83), the visual result of this experimentation is not necessarily creative. The competitive atmosphere prevailing in SNSs, the strong visual component, and the terms of the patriarchal deal seem to lead the girls toward a rather narrow repertoire, whether through inspiration or through imitation, as this exchange illustrates:

Mor: There's this girl, god help her … So small and yet so …

Adi: No, I'm not even talking about her tits, I'm talking about yesterday, when I saw Shirley's picture, and then I saw Karin's picture. Oh my god, I'm going crazy, I thought I was looking at Shirley and suddenly I see it's Karin Dekel! She's trying to copy you off! I told Shirley—are you aware of the fact that Karin Dekel is trying to imitate you?

Shirley: I know she is, she even told me so.

Mor: So? Why should she care that she is her role model? (G-2)

Competition appears to be carefully (though perhaps provisionally) targeted, and balanced by strong ties. The girls often consult one other before they post a photo

of themselves, and recount cases in which they received friendly suggestions advising them to post or not to post a certain image, for example, a picture in which one looks "fat, or with her nose [protruding]," or as Mor worded it, pictures in which the girl suffers from "non photogenia" (G-2). In certain cases girls would post images to a limited group of close friends, and consult them prior to the release of a new picture. These practices are consistent with Barak-Brandes and Levin's (2013) account of the structure of social relations of Israeli girls on SNSs. With a seemingly transparent feedback mechanism, experimentation turns into a learning experience. The girls risk provocation and test the boundaries of acceptable practice with immediate results, which they then can analyze:

> Michal: I'll tell you what … there are girls who post pictures of themselves in a swimsuit or half naked and they write something like, "Hey, who doesn't know me yet?" And then the boys are like: "Wow, great boobs, nice tits, I'd have you over" and stuff. They would write to me that kind of stuff when I was posting to Critiques. I would post a picture with my clothes on … Not that …
>
> Sivan: But like this … [Pouts and accentuates her buttocks]. Just kidding …
>
> Michal: I don't do that on purpose, I just stand and it happens naturally.
>
> Sivan: That's because you're used to it already.
>
> Michal: But I don't stick my butt out … There are girls who do. I used to do it just because I was bored. Not like, "I want you rate me," never. (G-2)

Rating constructs not only that which is evaluated and Liked but, importantly, it marks out practices that are off the scale. Yet the meaning of these, too, derives from the scale. Their off-the-grid location may be informed by rating practices (i.e., consciously staying off to indicate maturity or discuss others who are on) or temporary (i.e., checking out a picture among friends in preparation for posting); but they provide an important backstage space for reflection. At the same time, onstage performance involves immediate, known results, and it carries different meanings as the objects for rating vary:

> Maya: There's also a [boys'] hotties rating group, in which girls rate.
>
> Ella: You sign in, see what he looks like, and then tell him your criticism.
>
> Maya: … It's so much fun! [laughter]
>
> Ella: Lots of girls do it. There are girls who spend more time on this page than on their own profile!
>
> Maya: … I told someone: 1-ugly; 2.
>
> Q: You told someone that he's ugly?
>
> Maya: Sure! (G-3)

Thus, the girls use the rating sites for pleasure and amusement, to feel good about themselves and impress others, and to defy conventional normativity (Vaisman,

2009). Repeatedly, they constructed being indifferent to others' evaluation as a desired escape from social control, as the following account suggests:

> Maya: Some girls wear swimsuits and take a picture of themselves in that way. At home, in her bedroom, with heels [laughing].
>
> Goni: Okay, whatever. There are also girls who take pictures of themselves at the beach topless and just stand with their backs to the camera, something like that, as though no one sees them from the front. They live in their own bubble.
>
> Maya: They like "living the dream" [mocking].
>
> Q: What does that mean?
>
> Maya: Not to care what anyone says and do whatever you want. It looks like so much fun sometimes! Not to think about what people say about you.
>
> Goni: They just don't care about what people say about them and live like they want to live. (G-3)

In this spirit, participants in one of the groups admired a girl from their school, who wrote next to a photograph that shows her topless back to the camera while she is facing the sea: "The world is fucked up, not me" (Dana, G-4), apparently in response to criticism she faced at school concerning pictures she posted in SNSs. The girls may appreciate other girls' defiance against social norms — or at least their assumed indifference to them ("she doesn't give a damn," Tali, G-5) — and they may actively attempt to please, while remaining conscious of other girls' attempts to do the same.

Thus games of rating involve a reflective, critical stance vis-à-vis the photos and the act of evaluation itself. Attracting Likes, literally, is one of these reflexive practices. The recruiting may be attempted textually (compelling and setting up "Like if you hate Hitler" sorts of traps) and technically (downloading auto-Like software); as well as visually (posting an interior swimsuit photo). Crucially, whereas textual and technical recruiting stay within the realm of experimental play and, at least within the groups we interviewed, do not have far-reaching consequences — visual Likes attraction is implicated in the patriarchal deal and may occasion problematic encounters between the virtual and the real.

An economy of girls' photo rating

How do girls deal with these conflicting demands? The girls embraced the pervasive view that a sexual depiction of their bodies is an indication of a lack — of awareness, self-confidence, or friends. In particular, they resorted to attention and a lack thereof as the obvious explanation underlying such self-presentation — "she does it for attention," "her parents don't pay enough attention to her, maybe she doesn't get attention at home," "maybe it [the attention] isn't enough for her, or maybe she's jealous." One way or another, when a girl posts a picture that invites a response she appears to be signaling some mental distress:

Counselor: Why do you think [a girl would post her picture]?

Ella: Lack of attention.

Goni: Yes, lack of attention. Or lack of confidence.

Ella: Or to have more confidence. (G-3)

To explain the motivation for posting, the girls link self-confidence to proper, normative behavior. As Tali commented: "If you're so satisfied with yourself, why should you want to be rated?" and her friend Zohar confirmed: "We said it a thousand times already — they want the attention" (G-5). But their deliberations over this issue are far from conclusive:

Jordan: It could be that people around her don't accept the way she is, so she posts these photos to Critiques.

Sapir: It's pretty clear that it comes from very low self-confidence. Someone with high self-confidence and self-awareness …

Avia: *Or maybe it's just high self-confidence*, but you want it for your ego, like — I know [I'm hot], but I want you tell me this too. (G-6, emphasis added)

In this account, girls' desire to be visible and to display their photos in SNSs or rating groups is interpreted as self-expression, as Shiran suggests: "I post this because I am beautiful, and I want everyone to see I'm beautiful … They want the whole world, everyone, to see it" (G-2). Thus, whereas the speech act of pornographic images of women is an invitation: "go get her!" in relation to all women (Ziv, 2004), when they share their pictures, girls — at least some of them — may be saying: "here I am! Look at me!" In this way, the girls raise the possibility that putting one's self up for rating derives from self-confidence: a calculated move designed to display, confirm, and gain sexual and social capital and attain popularity, as Sarit explained: "to impress the boys, to say: 'yes, I'm worth it … ' So that boys will be attracted to her and will like her" (G-4). The girls follow the good advice "if you've got it, flaunt it" (Durham, 2008, p. 63), yet as Durham observes, the conditional "if" casts a shadow of doubt. So, repeatedly, the girls invoked and debated the link between posting a provocative image and signaling need, as in the following excerpt:

Sarit: Some girls are not ashamed, no matter what their bodies look like.

Noa: No, the popular girls, whose bodies look … full and all, so they would post. But girls that are not popular, and don't have confidence, they wouldn't post a picture in a swimsuit.

Sarit: It depends on the person's confidence. There's this girl, Orly. She has a really hot body, but no confidence. So she won't post [her] photo in a swimsuit, she won't post a [her] photo at all!

Noa: That's right. It depends at some point also on the person's confidence.

Maayan: I think there is no such thing as popular and not popular. If you have confidence, you'd post a picture even if you were big as a house, and if you don't

> have confidence, even if you were pencil thin, thin like this cell phone, you still wouldn't post [a picture of yourself], and it has nothing to do with being popular or not, or having a good body or not. (G-4)

In this discourse, then, the answer as to why a girls would post a revealing photo remains in the psychological realm; yet it draws on confidence and self-esteem, and not only a lack thereof, as explanation: A girl who posts a picture of herself and subjects herself for rating does that because she "needs attention"—but alternatively, she may be confident, and display her beauty "so that some guys behind the computer could tell her 'you're hot!' and Like her photo" (Sapir, G-6).

To describe the tactics employed for effective self-branding and rating, however, the girls adopted an economic discourse, carefully calculating the amount of exposure and the personal cost and gain they found suitable. In the discussions, they resorted to both psychological and economic accounts, but it is not accidental that the former was used to refer to other girls while the latter, to themselves. The psychological discourse seeks to unravel motivations for behaviors (posting pictures to Critiques), which are thereby pathologized. This discourse presumes psychological constructs ("self-confidence," "attention") whose absence or malfunctioning lead to deviant, abnormal behaviors. From this perspective, a girl's "lack of confidence" and others' "lack of attention" may explain extroverted behavior that can lead to mental vulnerability. By contrast, the economic discourse articulates a logic of cost and benefit: The rules of the game are explicit (or may be clarified and learned), and following them is the rational course of action—one can skillfully balance short-term gain (flattering rating) with long term loss (damaged reputation) and control the image/stimulus to create the desired rating/response.

The psychological discourse is a part of the girls' repertoire but it fails their attempts to understand why a girl would post provocative images (high self-esteem? low self-esteem?), and does not provide them with the toolkit they need for participation. But by considering their online activity in economic terms, they can shift the discussion from pathetic and pathological others to themselves: the economic discourse rationalizes cause and effect ("images that receive many Likes are those which show a lot of boobs"); legitimizes playfulness ("There is a Likes competition") while weighting the risks involved ("but I don't stick my butt out"); and it throws into sharp relief the biased social arrangements within which they find themselves operating ("but why do you have to limit yourself and he doesn't?").

But it would be a mistake to regard the economic discourse as empowering or liberating as compared to the psychological discourse. First, because both discourses are part of the girls' interpretive repertoires, even though each is deployed for a different rhetorical purpose. Second, the girls accept the premise of risk—along with the patriarchal order in which it is grounded—as a given; so it would be wrong to interpret the critique they do express ("men should get rid of this rape culture") as a serious challenge to the system. As the girls use the psychological-moralistic discourse to pass judgment on the behavior of other girls, so they use the economic discourse to study the Likes and responses an image receives, analyze their relationships, and gain

momentary control over the images they produce. A calculated management of a girl's body and its representations, then, allows her to negotiate the promise for "empowerment through the body" (Banet-Weiser, 2014, p. 97), and the threat to her reputation (Ringrose et al., 2013).

It appears that the encounter between girls' empowerment groups and the discussion about selfies, self-branding, and rating cannot but outline a "tightrope to be walked on, between the models we can make and the futures we can imagine" (Attwood, 2006, p. 17). For the girls we interviewed, to *not* rate — to retire from their activity on this playing field — is practically inconceivable. The viable course of action, therefore, entails a careful presentation of self on SNSs and a calculated management of their reputation. The thin line separating controversial behavior (sexually explicit participation in the economy of visibility) and pathological behavior (psychological vulnerabilities and motivations) reveals the risk involved in the patriarchal deal offered to the girls on social network sites. As part of this deal, the present and future of these girls are at stake. The chance of receiving attention and exposure, of playing and gaining a sense of control, is inseparable from the fear of harming one's reputation and, in extreme cases, the actual body. Nonetheless, the girls' discourse suggests that they do not accept the deal without a challenge.

Ironically, the explicit rating system and blatant recruitment of Likes serve to highlight the price tag, the double standard it embodies, and girls' ability to defy it. It is SNS structure — the architecture of image posting and rating, Like buttons and visible quantified responses — that allows the girls to interpret the display of the sexual body not as a psychopathological weakness but rather as an informed economic exchange. It is an architecture they did not design, but nonetheless one that they can appropriate and reclaim; one in which they can speak, play, and even protest.

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