



***“Say lovely things about me so that I know I am like that!”***  
**The Role of Positive Photo Comments Posted on Social  
Networking Websites in the Development of the Self-Image**

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**Abstract.** The usage of Social Networking Websites has become very popular in the last few years. ‘Talk to me!’, ‘Tell your opinion about me!’, ‘What do you think about me?’, ‘Comment’, ‘Like’... these are the most frequent messages of the virtual profile owners. The present study investigates the effects of the positive photo comments on the self-image. We (Kopacz, Sass, Timár and Varga, 2009) compiled a questionnaire examining the self-image and sent it electronically to more than 1,000 Hungarian people from Romania (average age: 22.15) who owned a profile on the Hi5 Social Networking Website ([www.hi5.com](http://www.hi5.com)). Eventually we could process the data from 41 people. Our first hypothesis was that positive comments have a positive effect on people’s body image perception, it proved to be false. The second hypothesis – women are more affected than men by the positive comments – proved to be valid. At last we compared men’s and women’s self-image, but we didn’t find significant differences.

**Keywords:** self-image, self-esteem, social networking websites, Internet, positive photo comment

### **Introduction and review of the literature**

The internet has become such a frequently used tool in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that it seems to be indispensable in our everyday life: besides looking up information, reading the news, downloading movies and music, listening to the radio, shopping and playing online, etc., it is a highly relevant medium of social interaction,

offering possibilities also for those who do not feel competent in carrying out these sorts of tasks. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has given many people coping with social anxiety the green light to create social relationships (Rice and Markey, 2009).

Researches demonstrate that adolescents, who use instant messaging in maintaining relationships with their peers, think that it helps them deepen their friendships (Gross, Juvonen, and Gable, 2002 – quoted by Rice and Markey, 2009). Green et al. (2005) found that women who got into touch with foreign men by using CMC techniques reported greater happiness and higher spirits as compared to those who met foreign men face to face (Green et al., 2005 – quoted by Rice and Markey, 2009).

Certain gender-based differences have been discovered regarding internet usage: Jackson, Ervin, Gardner and Schmidt (2001) found that women tend to use the internet rather for e-mailing while men resort to it more often in order to look up information (Jackson, Ervin, Gardner and Schmidt, 2001 – quoted by Colley and Maltby, 2008). As postulated by Wasserman and Richmond-Abbott (2005), though women make use of e-mail services more often than men do, men spend significantly more time in chat rooms than women (Wasserman and Richmond-Abbott, 2005 – quoted by Colley and Maltby, 2008). In the background of women's e-mail preferences and men's chat preferences, there lies a difference between the aims of the two communication types: while e-mail services rather help us keep up personal relationships with family and friends, chat rooms are the scenes of displaying the social power differences dominated by anonymity (Colley and Maltby, 2008).

Recent researches suggest that the spreading of personal websites and social networks has led to an alteration regarding people's opinion of one another. According to Weisbuch et al., people tend to judge other people that appear in the virtual world as if they would see them in the flesh; in face-to-face situations, people have a liking for the socially expressive people, which accounts for the expressiveness of the different websites as a basis for judging one another (Weisbuch, Ivcevic and Ambady, 2008).

The number of personal websites has reached such a limit that one can barely find a single adolescent or teenager without having at least one personal website, such as Facebook, MySpace, Hi5, Friendster (Lenhart and Madden, 2007 – quoted by Weisbuch, Ivcevic, and Ambady 2008). The growth in the number of personal website users is in direct proportion to the different age-groups; according to this statement, a research project targeting the American youth showed that while 41% of the 12-13 year-old adolescents own such web areas, this ratio amounts to 67% in the case of the 14-17 year-olds (Lenhart and Madden, 2007 – quoted by Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009).

Surveys assessing the time spent on different social websites suggest that logging into these websites is one of the daily routine activities of the American students. According to a 2007 research done by Lenhart and Madden, around 50% of the 12-17 year-olds log into their websites on a daily basis: 22% of them do so more than once a day, 26% once a day, 17% 3-5 days per week, 15% 2-3 days per week, and only 20% accesses these sites once a week or less (Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009). Since people dedicate so much time to their personal websites, these have become part of their everyday life and affect them continuously.

The aim of social networking websites is to help create and maintain social interaction in a virtual environment. Since our online personality provides only information fragments, it can be significantly different from our real personality. On such a website, besides the textual description, there are different categories one can fit in, as well as, pictures, backgrounds, and templates that you are free to choose from so that you as the creator may show a unified self-image. These websites make us possible to experiment with online introductions, share information about our lives with people we consider important, and receive feedbacks from those who have already bumped into our websites. Our virtual appearance is much easier to control than our real world appearance: we can decide what and how exactly we want to communicate, what characteristics we would like to lay stress on, and we can also boost our most attractive looks with the help of digital photography. In real world situations, the most powerful magnet of interpersonal attraction is physical charm, which is probably a determining factor in the world of internet as well (Wallace, 2006).

Certain researches found that social networking websites are used for maintaining the already existing friendships rather than making new friends (Ellison, 2007 – quoted by Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009). However, some other researches concluded that half of the teenagers make use of these pages so that they can make new friends (Lenhart and Madden, 2007 – quoted by Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009) while half of the high school students use these websites in order to let others know about them (Wiley and Sisson, 2006 – quoted by Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009). According to Buhrmeister's and Prager's (1995) self-communication model, peer group feedbacks affect people's self-esteem. For instance, a research carried out on a Dutch social networking website with subjects between 10 and 19 years old found that the participants' self-esteem was closely related to the comments received on their profiles and that self-esteem was usually connected to their well-being (Buhrmeister and Prager, 1995 – quoted by Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert, 2009). It is no surprise that positive feedback was found in a tight connection with positive self-esteem while negative feedback was associated with negative self-esteem (Valkenburg, Peter and Schouten, 2006 – quoted by Pempek, Yermolayeva

and Calvert, 2009). These researches let us conclude that adolescents use these websites to assess their peers' and other people's opinion about them. Our research carried out in Romania (Kopacz, Sass, Timár and Varga, 2009) raised the question whether the situation was the same with grown-ups: we wanted to find out to what extent their self-esteem and body image perception is affected by the comments as a significant feedback coming from others.. Setting out from this hypothesis, our research examined the impact that positive feedbacks received from others have on the people's body image perception. According to this, the positive feedbacks received from others (praise, appreciation) should exert a positive influence on individuals' self-esteem, more specifically, in respect of the physical component.

Body image represents a unique part of the global self-image since through the body, appearance, looks, characteristics, and abilities, it basically determines the relationship between the individual and the external reality (Fox, 1998 – quoted by Maïano, Ninio and Bilard, 2004). Outward appearance is the expression of status and sexuality; moreover, it is the utmost mediatory means of social communication. As several researches suggested, the judgement of body image leads to the development of global self-image with the adolescents (Fox, 2000; Whitehead and Corbin, 1997 – quoted by Maïano, Ninio and Bilard, 2004). During adolescence, body image takes a continually increasing negative trajectory, which is most applicable in the case of the girls (Wigfield et al., 1999 – quoted by Maïano, Ninio and Bilard, 2004). Marsh (1989, 1998) found in his researches that adolescents' global perception regarding their physical competence shows a significant decrease between 12 and 16 years of age (Marsh, 1989, 1998 – quoted by Maïano, Ninio and Bilard, 2004). Taking the aforementioned findings as a starting point, we assumed that adult women's body image perception would be affected to a greater degree by the positive photo comments than in the case of male individuals.

## **Data and methods**

Our research subjects were young people between 18 and 32 years of age of Hungarian nationality from Hungary and Romania (the average age was 22.15 years). The participants' profiles were chosen randomly from the Hi5 social networking website. During the pre-test, we sent out our questionnaires to approximately 3,000 people, out of which 125 responded. As for the post-test, we received responses from 41 individuals: 19 female and 22 male respondents.

The questionnaire used in the pre-test contained 15 items, which were meant to assess body image perception. These items were designed based on the characteristics (the attractiveness of face, eyes, teeth, hair, build, etc.) obtained throughout the pre-test. Responses were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 –

‘strongly disagree’; 2 – ‘disagree’; 3 – ‘neither agree nor disagree’; 4 – ‘agree’; 5 – ‘strongly agree’).

We used the same questionnaire during the post-test, inverting the items and inserting new items related to internal characteristics in order to avoid having them resend the questionnaires used in the pre-test. The values of the items inserted subsequently were obviously left out of consideration.

The experimental group was made up of 66 participants. These research subjects received 48 positive photo comments from 12 profiles within a three-week period while the members of the control group were not posted any comments at all. The positive comments were all connected with the items in the questionnaire such as the eyes, mouth, build (body weight, height, and body shape), teeth, feet, nails, hair, smile, face, and clothing.

After the three-week intervention period, we resent the questionnaires to the 125 participants. Before the deadline (seven days counted from the sending out of the questionnaires), we received 41 answers for the post-test questionnaires. The respondents’ data as well as the data contained in these questionnaires were both processed.

## Results and Discussion

According to our first hypothesis, positive comments have a positive effect on the people’s body image perception. This hypothesis was examined with the application of an independent sample T-test: no significant outcome was observed ( $p = 0.491$ ), which means that the positive comments did not alter the subjects’ body image perception.

Our second hypothesis – women are more affected than men by the positive comments – was examined with the help of a paired sample T-test. The hypothesis proved to be valid as positive comments ( $p = 0.007$ ) had a significant effect on women while men were not significantly influenced by them ( $p = 0.554$ ).

During the pre-test, we compared the discrepancies in men’s and women’s self-image perception in order to find out whether men or women have a more positive self-image perception in general. Despite that men reached apparently higher scores in the questionnaire on the average – that is, they apparently have a more positive body image perception (average scores in the experimental group: women = 3.94, men = 4.08; average scores in the control group: women = 3.70, men = 3.94) –, we obtained no significant differences ( $p = 0.711$ ,  $p = 0.874$ ). As a conclusion, there is generally no significant difference between men’s and women’s body image perception. Therefore, our third hypothesis proved to be false.

The aim of our study was to investigate the influence of the positive photo comments given on social network sites. Our results are relevant since they show

us that we have to endeavour to make the most of the positive effects of these frequently used means, such as the findings of Valkenburg and Peter (2007): the online strengthening of an offline-developed friendship; or the findings of Ando and Sakamoto (2008): an increase in the number of online friends reduces social anxiety and the feeling of loneliness with those individuals who reported a low self-esteem regarding their physical attractiveness. Establishing online contacts with people of the same sex had a positive effect on social anxiety symptoms while relationships maintained with people of the opposite sex reduced the feeling of loneliness experienced within the boundaries of a friendship but they increased the feeling of loneliness experienced in family relationships at the same time.

Even though our first hypothesis was found to be false, we could prove that in women's life the positive feedbacks regarding their physical appearance can really increase their self-esteem, so every little compliment matters! We can encourage people to say lovely things about the significant others to make them feel comfortable about themselves. We found that people who share many photos on social network sites have obtained a relatively high score on the self-esteem scale. This can be explained with the phenomena that those who share many photos are in general more contented with their physical appearance than those who do not share photos.

We are aware of the fact that our study has several shortcomings, it represents only a start for deeper analysis of the topic in our region. A larger sample could be more representative, the same as increasing the number of positive comments and the length of the commenting period would provide us more certain data. A forthcoming study could examine other aspects of the personality, like the connection of personality dimensions with the richness of the virtual profile (E.g.: which type of information – music, quotes, photos, videos – is tend to be shared by people with different personalities – introverted, extroverted – or how they react to different type of comments). It would also be interesting to examine the potential cultural differences regarding the subject (E.g.: are there differences in perceiving positive comments from people with various nationalities?).

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