Article

Social Media and Young People's Sexualities: Values, Norms, and Battlegrounds

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Abstract

This article explores how young people are making sense of sexuality in the context of social media, considering social media's material as well as symbolic operations. Drawing on 14 focus groups ($n = 89$, conducted in 2012 and 2015) with young people between 14 and 19 years of age in Dutch-speaking Belgium, this article is informed by young people's discussions, meanings, values, and norms on sexuality and social media, situated in everyday life peer group settings. The results argue how young people are making strong value judgments about sexuality in the context of social media and how they use a sharp hierarchical system to distinguish between "good" and "bad" sexual practices in social media. Therefore, young people draw on essentialist sexual ideologies. This article discusses these value judgments not only in relation to how social media functions but also in relation to social media's symbolic operations, namely how they are meaningful for young people's sexualities. The role of social media is discussed in relation to broader cultural dynamics of young people's changing sexual cultures, which are characterized by risk, resistance, individualization, and mediatization. The article concludes how young people's consistent need for making value judgments about sexuality in the context of social media may point to a conservatism that is driven by social media's overwhelming role in culture and society. Social media have become a crucial battleground for sexual politics; they need to be taken seriously as spaces that produce values and norms about sexuality, deciding what kind of sexualities are supported, repressed, or disciplined.

Keywords

youth, sexuality, social media, focus groups, values

Young people's sexual cultures are increasingly intertwined with social media. Rapidly becoming more pervasive, personal, and mobile (Livingstone, Mascheroni, & Staksrud, 2015), sexualities are shaped by the material and symbolic forms of social media. Material forms are social media's socio-technological forces that can be seen as organizing sexual institutions, practices, and desires, continuously negotiated by people's uses (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Social media's symbolic forms refer to how such platforms are discursively constructing meanings to sociality (e.g., "popularity," "reputation," and "authenticity"), which are then appropriated, circulating in culture and society, affecting the conventions of different "spheres" such as sexuality. This article explores how young people are making sense of sexuality in the context of social media; the context of social media means considering social media's material as well as symbolic operations.

Drawing on focus group interviews, the research of this article is informed by young people's discussions, meanings, values, and norms on sexuality and social media; "sexuality"

or "sexual" refers to any kind of discursive practice having a sexual connotation (e.g., uploading a sexy picture on social media). Sexuality is seen as intertwined with gender, desires (sexual attraction), and intimacies (e.g., courtship). The research presented in this article is situated within the context of Dutch-speaking Belgium; in Belgium, pedagogies and parenting styles tend to focus more on risks than on the opportunities of the Internet (Haddon & Livingstone, 2012), and also news media are reporting regularly on the dangers of social media and unwanted sexual solicitations. Generally, there is a tendency to support *online risk avoidance culture*, in which young people are pointed toward their *individual responsibilities*, explaining strategies to manage reputations and online identities (Walrave & Van Ouytsel, 2014).

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Previous research on youth, social media, and sexuality has focused on the gendered dimensions of self-representations (e.g., sexy pictures) and communicative interactions (e.g., "sexting"), investigating both the incorporation and resistance to particular gender and sexual ideologies (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Siibak & Hernwall, 2011). Other research has focused on how social media supports sexual developmental tasks, inquiring about both the risks and opportunities related to individual (e.g., demographics and skills) and contextual (e.g., education) factors (Hatchel & Subrahmanyam, 2016). However, there is a need for more in-depth engagements with young people's voices when researching sexuality and social media (Livingstone & Mason, 2015). In the last decade, research exploring the changing dynamics of young people's sexualities described how individualization, risk, and resistance are central features to understand the nature of the changing conditions of sexuality in contemporary Western youth culture (Johansson, 2007; Kehily, 2011; Weeks, 2007); it is crucial to understand both theoretically and empirically social media's increasingly dominant role in the shaping of sexual culture.

This article explores young people's sense making on sexuality and social media by critically drawing on the notion of sexual value. According to Adrienne Rich, "Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value" (Rich, 1993, p. 150). Making distinctions between "good" and "bad" sexualities is, according to Rich, maintained through an ideology praising sexuality that is "'good', 'normal', and 'natural' [and] should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial" (Rich, 1993, p. 152). The results discussed in this article will demonstrate how notions of sexual value are strongly reproduced by the participants. Drawing on both the material and symbolical contexts in which social media are organizing sexualities, it is further shown how social media are shaping sexual norms. The logic in which social media are operating and social media's symbolic constructions of notions such as popularity and reputation have been appropriated by young people in ways that allow them to make sense of sexual norms.

This article argues that we need to understand how rapid, continuously transforming media technologies, such as social media, may be o*verwhelming* for (young) people (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016). Social media could be overwhelming because they demand *rapid adaptation* (e.g., to a new interface, to a new way of organizing interaction, and to a new way for being "popular'), so that there remains little space for *negotiating, questioning, or resisting* the ways of being with social media. As such, social media may contribute to bringing the dynamics of social life beyond some of the features of early late modernity (Bauman, 2005). Early late modernity, where youth culture has been thought of as a continuous struggle between the incorporation of and resistance to dominant ideologies (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976), may now be making room for a status quo, a

new conservatism. This article points to a sexual conservatism among youth when making sense of sexuality in the context of social media.

Precisely because social media are experienced as overwhelming, they should be taken seriously as battlegrounds where the politics of sexuality are being shaped in culture and society. The continuous struggles over sexual value and norms are silencing important societal discussions about sexual agency and ethics (Angelides, 2013; Hasinoff, 2016), such as to what extent do social media allow young people to actively negotiate their sexual lives and to what extent are young people discussing consent in the context of social media. These seem crucial questions for deeply mediatized sexual lives. Drawing on how young people are making sense of sexuality in the context of social media, this article explores how participants strongly reproduced societal moral panics and pedagogical fears. Participants explained how to manage risks, privacy, "good" sexual reputations, complex social media interfaces, and dealing with control and surveillance.

Social Media Logic and Young People's Sexualities

How media, as material forms, are shaping social fields was investigated by Altheide and Snow (1979) through the concept of media logic. Altheide and Snow argued that media are contributing to the shaping of the social order in modern societies. Media logic as a form of communication "is a process through which media present and transmit information" (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 10). *Media Logic* explored a number of strategies through which media shape and construct reality. Such strategies, such as presenting events as "news flows" by using familiar formats and routines, are used by media producers to increase audience attention. As recently argued by van Dijck and Poell (2013), the concept of media logic has been under-theorized in the context of growing social media platforms; social media platforms are equally using different strategies to increase user attention and activity, shaping the social order. Therefore, van Dijck and Poell refer to a *social media logic*, which is the "processes, principles, and practices through which these platforms process information, news, and communication, and more generally how they channel social traffic" (van Dijck and Poell, 2013, p. 5). The concept of social media logic offers useful analytical power with which to study how the material dimensions of media contribute to the shaping and ordering of intimacies and sexualities in the everyday lives of people and lead to the question: what happens when social media logic meets institutions (e.g., marriage and relationships), identities, practices, and social forces that organize sexual practices and desires? Van Dijck and Poell (2013, p. 5) discuss four main elements of social media logic: programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. These elements can each be seen as transporting social media

logic outside of social media platforms into young people's sexualities. Without being exhaustive, I will provide examples of how such processes of transportation work.

First, programmability can be defined as

the ability of a social media platform to trigger and steer users' creative or communicative contributions, while users, through their interaction with these code environments, may in turn influence the flow of communication and information activated by such a platform. (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5)

Because of the specific ways popular social media are being programmed, they are criticized for steering users' performances of gender and sexual identities into coherent, stable, and fixed entities, rather than being open to the dynamic and diverse ways genders and sexual identities are lived in everyday life (Cover, 2012). While many users may subvert or ignore essentialist self-representational tools on social media platforms,[1] Facebook's "real and authentic identity strategy," the most popular social networking site (van Dijck, 2013), has become the dominant model in which online identities are usually organized. Facebook's strategy demands users to only use names on the platform that are stated on official identification documents, which may not always reflect how people identify in everyday life (MacAulay & Moldes, 2016). Because of social media's social and cultural significance, such logic may recirculate as a broader "popular desire to identify 'real selves' that are true, single, and consistent" (van Zoonen, 2012, p. 46). Programming organizes people's sexualities in a not so neutral way. The design choices of platforms are not only technological or commercial, they are also morally supporting particular ways to organize intimacy, indicating a status quo on sexual essentialism, circulating the idea of an existing "natural" sexual self (Rahman & Jackson, 2010). As research showed, they are redefining social concepts such as the practices, places, and scales on which young people make intimate relationships public. Many social media are programmed to give a prominent place to "officialise" and "institutionalise" intimate relationships (Ito et al., 2010, p. 123) which reinforces normative cultural interests and breeds romantic and heteronormative ideals (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013).

The second element of social media logic, popularity, refers to how mass media's strategy of increasing the popularity of certain people and issues has become entangled with social media. Social media algorithms define popularity in a functional way through quantifying likes, most viewed, scores, and so on. Social media users are expected to manipulate and influence their popularity scores, which relate to a user's reputation (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 6).[2] In many ways, for everyday users of social media, the relation of what popular might mean is paradoxically related to reputation. For example, research has described how young girls and boys on social media, when talking about love or when posting sexy pictures, are using resources (e.g., popular music, celebrity, and advertising culture) and strategies (e.g., irony, parody, bricolage, and intertextuality) taken from popular culture (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015b; Manago, 2013). Such a strategy may gain them visibility, romantic successes, and social capital. However, especially for young girls, employing such popularity strategies is the equivalent of walking a tightrope; these strategies are often seen as damaging the reputation because they could lead to the users being labeled as "too sexy" or "too slutty" (Ringrose, 2011b). Popularity and reputation, as related to young people's sexualities on social media, can be seen as mechanisms of control, relying on the same-old-gendered double standards in which *some* sexy practices are applauded, while others are rejected.

The third type of social media logic described by van Dijck and Poell (2013) is "connectivity," which is the primary goal with which social media platforms are advertising themselves, connecting people in networked structures to other users, content, and advertisers. However, among people who use them, they are also surveillance-to-control tools (Trotter & Lyon, 2012, p. 91), in which people can watch each other without revealing that they are doing so. Such social media voyeurism is a popular pastime for many young people (boyd, 2007), but it can also be used to police sexual practices and identities. As I have argued elsewhere, young people tend to surveil peers whom they suspect to be gay, for fun, but it may also lead to stigmatization. As such, non-heterosexual youth may adjust themselves to act "normal," because many eyes could be watching (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015a).

Finally, datafication is a not so visible process through which social media monitor and research users and predict the needs of users (e.g., by showing them nearby people with the same interests) often in "real time" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 9). Datafication allows "people to directly connect to other people with whom they are involved in specialized relationships of common interest" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 8). Datafication has changed social practices and the ways in which many people look for love. Young people often show romantic interest through social media by connecting to the person they are attracted to through mutual online friends (Ito et al., 2010), which may be suggested to them by the social media platform. Dating apps such as Tinder (Vanden Abeele, 2014) are built around connecting people by showing people nearby in real time, which may change people's dating practices or provide opportunities for casual sex (Sumter, Vandenbosch, & Ligtenberg, 2017).

Sexual Cultures, Youth, and Social Media

While understanding the material dimensions of social media has analytical value with which to understand the shaping of sexuality in everyday life, it also opens the door to much

more complex questions about sexual cultures, youth, and social media. Rather than a unitary logic of social media working by itself (Hepp, 2012, p. 46), many actors and processes of social transformation are involved. While social media logic may penetrate many different practices and domains of sexuality, social media logic may be supported or at the same time disrupted in many ways. Indeed, while social media logic may explore how people negotiate the affordances of social media platforms, it cannot explain the many messy and contradictory ways young people and society make sense of intimate and sexual social media practices. Altheide and Snow's (1979, p. 15) vision on how media are functioning is therefore too limited. It is not so, as Altheide and Snow argued, that institutions and social practices simply conform to media's "dominant force." Rather, a more open-ended approach to media culture promises to be better at understanding media's role in young people's sexual cultures (Couldry, 2012, pp. 159-160). Such an open-ended approach to media culture and processes of change, which is referred to as *mediatization* (Hepp, 2012), needs to be situated within specific spaces, times, and practices.

Young people's sexual cultures are historically, in many ways, related to media and more recently social media. Media showing sexual images to children and young people have been central to many debates on the risks of bad media influences (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). Given that social media are now infrastructures through which young people live their intimate and sexual lives, such *risk discourses* are omnipresent in talk about young people and social media. Social media are seen as risky for young people's sexual lives because of possible online predators and stranger dangers, sexualization of young girls' bodies, potential loss of sexual reputation, and so on (Livingstone & Mason, 2015).[3] Associated with risk discourses, there is a strong reliance on *individual responsibilities*; society manages such risks by arguing that young people should be trained as rational actors to make safe choices in social media that maximize their online opportunities and help them avoid (sexual) risks (Ringrose, 2011b, pp. 122-123). Both *risk* and *individualization* are central to how sexual knowledge is constructed in youth cultures where social media are omnipresent. Discourses on young people's uses of social media are one of the many significant battlegrounds where sexual cultures are negotiated, where "sexual values and norms are struggled over" (Attwood & Smith, 2011, p. 237).

Such processes of social transformation, where young people's sexualities are seen as risky and individualized, have a history. Before the emergence of social media, modern Western societies attached huge symbolic weight to sexuality. Sex, per se, is seen as harmful to the young. As such, this symbolic weight has "chiselled into extensive social and legal structures designed to insulate minors from sexual knowledge and experience" (Rubin, 1993, p. 144). While the democratization of sexuality, from the 1960 onwards, has liberalized sexual mores, for the young such societal anxieties still pose challenges when they do not comply with the ideal of the "innocent child" (Jackson & Scott, 2015). Moreover, as Weeks (2007) argues, since the 1990s, a new individualism of sexuality has made it increasingly difficult to know what an "ideal" sexuality might be. Multiple sites of authority are each speaking their own truth; there is no one way to make sense of "good" sexual values. Dominant discourses on sexuality steered by particular institutions (e.g., religious) have been replaced by many more voices speaking "truths" about sexuality. Rather than obvious rights or wrongs, there are endless flows of "sexual stories" shaping meanings and politics about sexuality associated with self-making and self-invention (Plummer, 1995). Sexual practices and lifestyles have therefore become increasingly risky at the same time; a moral choice is *yours* to make. Such tensions are clearly reflected in research exploring young people's sexualities. Young people are shifting between "new types of sexual patterns and falling into traditional forms" (Johansson, 2007, p. 102), meaning that young people may seem more sexually liberated than previous generations, but young people themselves are applying stricter self-guiding morals at the same time. These morals are based on traditional gendered orders, heterosexual identities, and family values. Buckingham and Bragg (2004, p. 245) concluded their study of young people's sexuality and media by referring to the same tensions, which they described as a "regulated freedom." "Children today have been bound to become self-regulating media consumers." When they encounter sexual material in the media, young people express many moral concerns about such content, while equally valuing sex in the media as source of information and learning.

While young people's sexual cultures may have some dominant features, sexual cultures are always far from monolithic (Attwood & Smith, 2011). Public discourses framing young people's intimate and sexual social media practices as risky while emphasizing young people's individual responsibilities may be renegotiated and resisted in everyday uses of social media by young people themselves. While young people's sexual cultures are shaped by societal norms and adults, research demonstrates how youth may use sexuality to challenge adults in response to those dominant norms (Kehily, 2011). Social media offer many opportunity structures for young people to participate in their own sexual cultures beyond the control of adults. This has been illustrated by a number of studies on young people's self-representations and interactions on popular social media (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Ringrose, 2011a; Siibak, 2010; Siibak & Hernwall, 2011). Also, young people have been successfully engaged in producing popular online stories (e.g., creating a YouTube channel) in which they, for example, championed for the acceptance of non-normative sexual and transgender identities (O'Neill, 2014). While many of these studies have observed how young people are (re)producing sexual cultures online, research is scarce on how young people *themselves* give meaning to their sexual cultures and social media,

Table 1. The changing dynamics of social media use among focus group participants between 2012 and 2015.

	Focus groups 2012	Focus groups 2015
Mobile	*Half of the participants had a smartphone.* *Almost no participant had a mobile Internet connection.* *A large survey in 2012 showed that 33% of young people were connected with mobile Internet in the Dutch-speaking Belgian region.*[a]	*Most of the participants had a smartphone.* *More than half of the participants had a mobile Internet connection.* *A large survey in 2015 showed that 63% of young people were connected with mobile Internet in the Dutch-speaking Belgian region.*[b]
Pervasive and Personal	*Participants mostly used Facebook and YouTube.* *Most participants also had an account on the social networking site Netlog, but preferred Facebook much more, as it was more "serious."*	*Facebook and YouTube were still popular among participants.* *Users were familiar with mobile apps Snapchat and Instagram. Also mentioned many times were Tinder and Swarm.* *Snapchat was mentioned many times and popular among participants. As such, they showed interest in fun and playful communication with trusted ties, rather than sharing in larger social networks (e.g., Facebook).*

[a]Number is based on a research report asking 1459 Dutch-speaking Belgian youth (aged 12–18) about their use of the Internet (Jeugddienst & Jeugdwerknet, 2012).
[b]Number is based on a research report asking 3291 Dutch-speaking Belgian youth (aged 12–18) about their use of the Internet (Mediaraven & LINC, 2016).

specifically related to how they negotiate social media logic and the shaping of sexuality within the context of social and cultural dynamics such as risk and resistance, individualization, and mediatization (Livingstone & Mason, 2015).

Social media transform continuously, as well as young people's uses of social media (Livingstone et al., 2015). As such, it is far from clear how these material and symbolic transformations are shaping young people's sexual cultures in the context of social media. For example, media literacy programs and schools have acted on the challenge of guiding young people about sexuality and social media by explaining that it is important to monitor their online identities; these programs emphasized the importance of "protecting" and "managing" reputations (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2014). Nowadays, young people are increasingly becoming bored with such serious platform policies and media literacies. This is illustrated by the decreasing popularity of Facebook, a platform many young people have become to see as a source for news rather than an exciting tool with which to connect with friends (Luckerson, 2013). Nowadays, young people consume much more picture-based, ephemeral, smartphone social media-like Snapchat.[4] Snapchat is about playful communication with trusted ties, and its communications are more spontaneous, more intimate, more private, and may be more flirty (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016). Exploring how young people are making sense of *doing* sexuality in the context of rapidly evolving social media, the knowledge they produce while negotiating social media logic, social media culture, and public discourses on risk and individualization can teach us about how sexual cultures are made sense of by Western youths.

Method

The discussions in the following sections are based on the results of 14 focus groups which included a total of 89 participants (52 girls and 37 boys) between the age of 14 and

19 years. While the first eight focus groups were conducted in 2012, the last six took place in 2015. As such, this research is situated within a rapidly evolving social media ecology. In the last decade, social media in Europe has become much more mobile, pervasive, and personal (Livingstone et al., 2015), which is clearly reflected in the social media uses of the participants and the broader context of mobile media use in Dutch-speaking Belgium where this research is situated. An overview comparing the situation in 2012 and 2015 is shown in Table 1.

Focus groups were compiled from pre-existing social groups, ranging from five to eight participants around the same age. Participants were familiar with each other from school or a youth center through which they were recruited for this study (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2002). Within the focus groups, both boys and girls were participating in the discussions, although two focus groups only included girls.

Participants were recruited from diverse educational backgrounds. Focus groups done in more urban contexts (*N*=8) were more ethnically diverse than in rural areas. While discussing social media, practices in different socio-technological contexts were focused on (e.g., Facebook and Snapchat), such as displaying sexual identity, relationship status, exploring and experimenting with sexual desires through texts (status updates, hashtags, etc.), pictures (from profile pictures to selfies and snaps, etc.), and communicative interactions (chatting, commenting, texting, etc.). As many of the topics discussed within the focus groups were sensitive, participants usually talked about hypothetical scenarios and third-party projections. Two focused exercises were used to initiate discussions; participants were asked to sort different cards containing social media platforms (according to most used, liked, or disliked), and they were asked to interpret a picture of a kissing couple on a social networking site.

Although some participants talked about their own experiences, it must be emphasized that rather than *actual*

experiences, the research focused on knowledge about values and norms, exploring power struggles in young people's sexual cultures related to social media. The focus group data were coded using NVivo software (QRS International, 10) and analyzed according to the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). When discussing the results, I will not give an exhaustive overview of these focus groups, but rather will illustrate arguments.

Results

Reproducing Sexual Value and Authenticity in Social Media Contexts

In this part, I will introduce how participants were reproducing essentialist values when talking about sexuality in the context of social media. They were not questioning or resisting the logic in which social media organized sexual practices but rather explaining strategies of how to be making the "right" choices about what content to share and how to master the reputational logic of social media.

Participants rarely talked about sexuality and social media in positive or more neutral ways; sexuality in the context of social media was not addressed as forms of communication, pleasure, or fun. Frequently, participants seemed to be showing off, almost in a competitive way, how smart they were at dealing with sexual risks online. In 2015, I talked with the participants about Tinder, which was usually seen as bad, a very "superficial" way to meet people. When Dora (girl, 17, 2015)[5] made such comments about Tinder, Ringo (boy, 17, 2015) tried to challenge her by referring to two classmates who are now "a couple thanks to Tinder." Dora responded, "That turned out all right, but usually . . ." In this case, it was acceptable that the couple met via Tinder because they were now in a traditional relationship. The participants dealt with intimacy and sexuality in social media by falling back on traditional relationship forms.

Some argued that sharing sexual messages might be acceptable in a stable relationship where trust existed. It makes sense to only engage in intimate or sexual conversations with someone you trust. However, the participants' competitive urge to be seen as dealing with sexuality in social media in a smart way created a hierarchical system that valued intimate and sexual practices as either "smart" (good/safe/normal) or "stupid" (bad/unsafe/abnormal). Many of these moral judgments had much more in common with gendered and essentialist sexual ideologies than with being safe online. Consider the following conversation from a 2012 focus group:

Nina (girl, 17, 2012)

[responding to a picture of a girl in a sexy pose on a social networking site] Yeah, I mean, It's like you're exposing yourself completely . . . It's like . . .

Julie (girl, 18, 2012)

It's like she's saying, "Take me."

Nina (girl, 17, 2012)

Yeah, exactly.

Being too sexy, too slutty, too anonymous, too nude, or too gay were common evaluations of peers' self-representations and many other practices in social media. Such "stupid" self-representations were read by participants as simply demanding attention or being "unnatural," "unreal," or "inauthentic." The social media context in which those intimacies and sexualities were negotiated made participants compete to be seen as more "authentic" by being more spontaneous and immediate than others. As Gunn (2015) argues, mediated authenticity works as a contract between actors in communicative processes that needs to be maintained. In the two following examples, both Evy and Hermien refer to such an "authenticity contract":

Evy (girl, 15, 2012)

More natural, not a picture where you are posing too much. A spontaneous picture of yourself and . . . more normal. If you have a slutty picture on . . . Good guys will know and they will not be interested.

Hermien (girl, 17, 2015)

You can get to know people in more than 100 other ways, way more natural [than using a dating app].

Authenticity is an evaluative concept, as Grazian (2010) notes. It connotes a "social value" that is "tradition-bound, pretentious and essentialist." Indeed, this longing for authentic intimacies and sexualities connects to a sexual politics that reinforces essentialist beliefs by relying on cultural tropes of a "good" (hetero) sexuality. In this way, not being authentic or real has the potential to produce pain and suffering for those who do not comply with the norms (McRobbie, 1994, p. 70).

Social Media and the Shaping of Sexual Norms

This part will elaborate on the material and symbolic ways in which social media are shaping sexual norms. Young people use self-guiding moral judgments as strategies to make sense of and evaluate (sexual) behavior in the context of social media. Also, such self-disciplining relates to young people's knowledge about social media being surveillance-to-control tools.

Overwhelming social media. When I asked young people about everyday intimate and sexual practices on social media, they

usually talked about related risks and how to avoid them. Whether we talked about a relationship status on Facebook, posting or sending sexy pictures, looking for dates, or sending sexual messages, they found it smart to see sexuality as mostly private matters intended for outside of social media. As Sofie (girl, 17, 2012) explained when talking about pictures on Facebook, "I do not see why everyone should see you kissing your lover." Even when using more private interpersonal communication tools to chat or snap, trying to keep such content from the public is, as explained by Bas (boy, 17, 2015) "doomed to fail"; everything could be shared or taken out of context by capturing screenshots. Many of the discussions revolved about defining what is too private to share or what is simply "bad" and inacceptable. As Tom (boy, 16, 2015) explained, "Some people really go over the top, they take a picture of the boy and girl in bed under the sheets, I mean."

Defining what is too private or what is inacceptable seemed far from clear, but was determined by individual moral judgments. The gendered and essentialist discourses on sexuality, which continuously valued sexualities as either good or bad, were dubiously translated when participants reflected on more concrete behavior. For example, while Eva (girl, 14, 2012) argued that pictures need to be "natural" and not "slutty" in order to attract "the right guy," Leen (girl, 14, 2012) and Jan (boy, 14, 2012) expected pictures to be "beautiful" to be socially or romantically successful. This raises the question, when is something too slutty, too ordinary, or too sexy? There were no consistent social norms, but there was continuous judgment. Consequently, young people themselves define "sexual risk" as coming from their own peer groups and rarely as coming from "outside," such as from "online predators." They described feeling fear over not behaving "right," anxiety over losing their reputation, the need to avoid *failing*,[6] and the possibility of being shamed or bullied.

Annabel (girl, 17, 2015) told a story about a boy at her school who "took a picture of himself semi-naked." By mistake, he shared it with all his contacts on Snapchat, and many people took screenshots, sharing it widely in the school discussion groups on Facebook Messenger. "I don't think that boy feels good right now," Annabel explained. While Annabel showed compassion, she told that other people at school did not; the boy failed to behave appropriately and therefore deserved to be shamed. Moreover, he failed to manage Snapchat's complex interface appropriately as he shared the picture by mistake.

Many of the participants' stories showed that "managing" social media use, as well as making sense of sexual value and the ambiguous social norms, was overwhelming at times. Managing sexuality revealed to be a highly individualized responsibility, positioning every single individual as the *only* arbiter of moral authority. As such, there was not one dominant way to understand *good sexual practices* in social media; rather, there was a disciplining by peer control. While such a condition of uncertainty and ambiguity may refer to

broader transformations in young people's sexual cultures, social media pushes this condition forward. Participants in 2012 discussed what is appropriate to share on social media; participants in 2015 had to make choices between many more platforms and mobile applications discussing *what should be shared on which social media platform*. Social media's programmability allows rapid reorganizations of people's intimacies. Social media and particularly Facebook's definition of popularity as reputation is dominant in discursively constructing online ethics that demand participants are "your real self" in order to maintain popularity and reputation (Hoffmann, Proferes, & Zimmer, 2016). This makes it difficult for people to maintain privacy and anonymity. As argued by Hatchel and Subrahmanyam (2016), "[A]nonymity afforded by a digital platform may moderate youths' disinhibition and self-disclosure, key elements of youth identity and intimacy development" (p. 4). While anonymity may play a significant role in intimacy development, users have been guided by social media logic to morally disapprove of it. Although the popularity of Snapchat could be seen as challenging this reputational, real-name culture by allowing more playful communication, anonymity, and privacy, participants in 2015 (most of whom were Snapchat users) felt that Snapchat had "a bad reputation."[7] Part of this reputation relates to their moral disapproval of playfulness and anonymity, which illustrates how dominant this culture of reputation and seriousness has become. Sarah (girl, 18, 2015) claimed, "If you are sending messages that are somewhat sexual, while you are anonymous, then you are strange," while Glenn (boy, 17, 2015) argued, "Why would you want to be anonymous unless you're saying bad things?" Tom (boy, 17, 2015) claimed that being anonymous online would make others suspicious that you were not straight: "Everyone would think I'm gay."

Both the material and symbolic aspects in which social media are organizing sexualities are shaping sexual norms. The rapid ways social media are reorganizing sociality could be seen as overwhelming for young people, complying with the moral order in which sexuality is organized in the context of social media demands continuous adaptation.

Moral distance, control, and surveillance. When the participants reflected about everyday intimate life-worlds in social media, it was common to distance themselves from their peers whom they said were behaving in risky or inappropriate ways. Whether talking about sexy pictures, messages, or dating, many of them described such practices, but they distanced themselves. Kim (girl, 14, 2012), when talking about a sexy picture, phrased it thusly: "*I* would never put that on Facebook, or take such a picture, but if other people want to do that, well okay" (author's emphasis). Such moral distancing played out as a way to deal with risk in a competitive way.

While Fien (girl, 17, 2015) stated Tinder was "bad" and "superficial," she was confronted by another person in the focus group that she uses the app herself. Fien defensively

responded by saying, "I use it in a not so serious way." Max (boy, 18, 2015) thought Tinder was "silly," he only used Tinder to "keep some women busy and have some fun." Silverstone (2007, p. 11) explains taking such a morally distant position as how media technologies "undermine the expectation of responsibility and reciprocity that action and communication in face-to-face settings conventionally require" (p. 11). The example of Fien and Max illustrates how they positioned themselves as morally superior to others using Tinder. Max did not show a close human connection with the people he met on the app, which allowed him to feel less responsible for the people he was making fun of on Tinder than he maybe would have in face-to-face situations. Tinder's social media logic plays a role in this process. Its complex programming, its particular way of making sense of popularity and reputation, its process of datafication that is always keen on connecting users to distant people with whom they share no more than algorithmic parameters.

As illustrated above, occasionally, participants were interpellated by their peers who noticed ambivalences and inconsistencies in judging sexual practices on social media as "good" or "bad." The focus groups allowed to observe the participants engaging in everyday social talk; when Tom (boy, 16, 2012) criticized other boys who had carefully styled "sexy" profile pictures in which they posed bare to the waist, Sam (boy, 17, 2012) cheekily interrupted him, pointing out to Tom that "I have seen such a picture of him stripped to the waist with a pink background and a hat!" Tom, who was visibly annoyed, quickly defended himself by saying that the picture was taken "at the pool. There was a party at the house of some girl."

Such moments are illustrative of Deleuze's (1992) description of "societies of control." The participants' individual moral judgments about sexual value showed that there was no institutional site that was disciplining their intimacies and sexualities; rather, each of them was trying to get a grip on what norms they should comply with in the context of these technological systems. Conversations such as those between Tom and Sam make young people aware that surveillance is multifaceted in social media (Trotter & Lyon, 2012, p. 91), learning them about a potentially lurking audience.

Conclusion: Social Media as a Battleground for Sexual Politics

When making sense of sexuality in the context of social media, the discussions in the focus groups made clear that the participants had a sharp sense of a hierarchical system that values sexuality. Their values were focused on the importance of taking individual responsibilities, maintaining strong moral positions in online contexts. Partly, social media shaping sexuality may be rather functional, young people struggle with the rapidly changing and complex interfaces of apps such as Snapchat. A more complex way that social media are shaping sexualities relates to broader symbolic dimensions; those are connected to culture and society's responses to social media transforming many aspects of young people's everyday lives. Being *overwhelmed* may be a way to describe how people *feel*, young people as well as adults, about sexuality in the context of social media. As social media have become intertwined with social life so rapidly, and transform continuously, this may be so overwhelming that it renders any opposition or resistance to social media's material and symbolic operations useless; one can only rapidly adapt. The overwhelming condition of social media can be observed through how broader cultural narratives are speaking to young people. Different societal actors such as media literacy, education, adults, and mass media are all taking part in the mediatization of young people's sexualities, telling them how to behave online, what it means to have an online reputation, and so on. We should be aware that many of the discourses participants reproduced echoed society's moral panics.

Despite having the best intentions to guide young people online, society has introduced a rigorous regime of control that is not based on sexual agency, nor ethics. As argued by Attwood and Smith (2011, p. 241), dealing with young people's sexualities in a moralistic way is far from effective. For example, media literacy that is based on efficient online identity and reputation management reconstructs essentialism, the idea of an existing real and natural self, rather than being open to the multiple dynamic ways intimate identities are lived in everyday life. Such ethics of online behavior work *for* social media, not for sexual agency, in the sense that a single identity is more controllable for real-time data analysis. We must be aware that for young people who are exploring their sexualities, social media logic could, at moments, fit rather uneasily with the messy and contradictory ways intimate social lives are lived (Plummer, 2001).

The epistemology of the focus group method has not allowed me to observe the messiness of everyday behavior related to social media and young people's sexualities (Bloor et al., 2002). It is important to acknowledge that the method of focus groups I used, in which the researcher was present to strategically guide discussions on sexual norms and values and in which participants were put together from pre-existing social groups, is framing the research data in particular ways. I aimed to expose knowledge on dominant social and cultural norms; what young people think is socially desirable to say about social media and sexuality.

However, the *consistent* value judgments throughout the different focus groups may be pointing to a new sexual conservatism in young people's knowledge on managing "good" sexual values and norms. This conservatism is a way of dealing with the complexities of perceived and real online risks in a rapidly, continuously transforming social media ecology. Rapid social change driven by the digital age makes relying on traditional values comfortable or makes a competitive individualism a smart choice (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016).

Social media are to be taken seriously as material and symbolic spaces in which battles over sexual politics are currently negotiated; social media have become crucial battlegrounds for sexual politics. Conflicts over sexual values and norms are continuously deciding which sexualities in social media should be supported, repressed, or disciplined. A crucial question for sexual politics is how we can realize the potential of media, to what extent is social media creating a space working *for* young people's sexualities and not against it (Silverstone, 2007, p. 33)? Current politics seem to be working against sexual agency. Therefore, society should start to engage with young people's social media lives, "interrogating what is held normal, natural, and healthy" (Attwood & Smith, 2011, p. 241). Addressing the current conflicts about sexuality in the context of social media might mean addressing how to deal with overwhelming social media and how society *feels* about sexuality, young people, and social media.

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Notes

1. As illustrated elsewhere (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015b), resulting from online ethnographic research on a popular social media platform, many young users were ignoring software inventories, demanding that they narrowly choose a sexual identity to represent themselves. Some may subvert such limited options by using more creative self-representational tools to share personal stories referring to sexual identity.
2. As noted by van Dijck and Poell (2013, p. 7), platforms such as Klout "measure popularity scores and reputational rankings" of a person's online presence. Such ways of measuring create new standards and understandings of "popular' and being "influential."
3. Sexualization refers to how our mainstream culture has become more overtly and directly sexual (McNair, 2013, p. 12). Some feminist media scholars are concerned about young people (mostly girls) internalizing sexualized ideals regarding their bodies, personalities, self-representations, and interactions on social media (Gill, 2007).
4. In 2013, many news media reported on Facebook's investor report which argued that young people are losing interest in the social network because of the competition of smartphone apps like Instagram (Luckerson, 2013).
5. The participants' names are anonymized. The quotes in this article are translated from Dutch. To provide some information on the participants quoted, I will refer to boy/girl, age, and the year of the focus group.
6. The idea of "failing" refers to something young people disapprove. For example, participants would refer to Facebook pages which are called "Snapchat fails." Those pages are collections of screenshots taken from snaps that are seen as humorous, stupid, and unwise.
7. Many of the participants mentioned that Snapchat's bad reputation also came from news media which warned that Snapchat was storing private and personal pictures.

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