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## WHAT'S AT STAKE WHEN SEX IS DEPLATFORMED?

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Sex creates life, affirms life, and is an essential part of the human experience. Sex is also worried about, moralized over, and increasingly regulated by social media platforms through a combination of human and automated means (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel 2020).

Although marking adult material Not Safe For Work (NSFW) can productively be used to classify and sort social media sex, there are increasing attempts to remove it completely, locking off potentially fun, healthy avenues for sexual images, stories, and encounters (Paasonen, Jarrett & Light 2019). As the US Senate passed the package bill of FOSTA-SESTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) in 2018, many corporately owned, US-based platforms started pushing sex out.

Much of the scholarly and activist critique of the “deplatforming of sex” (Molldrem 2018) focuses on harm to LGBTQI youth, sex workers, and to a lesser extent (queer) artists (Byron 2019; Haimson et al 2019). This rhetoric, while inarguably valid, frames sexual expression on social media as valuable inasmuch as it is a source of support, education, or self-actualization for marginalized and minoritarian groups. We argue that sex on social media is important as is, as part of everyday life.

This paper brings together Katrin Tiidenberg and Emily van der Nagel’s extensive research (~ 50 total interviews between 2011 and 2020, an extended 2011 to 2018 ethnography with a community of NSFW bloggers on Tumblr, and a year-long observation of multiple sex related Reddit communities) with people who have incorporated various social media platforms and apps into their sex lives. Out of the analysis of this material, we distill three central themes, each of which we support with

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three arguments. Together, the presentation makes a case for why sex deserves to be part of generic social media for consenting adults.

## **Nine arguments in defense of sex on social media**

Our first group of three arguments pertain to people's sexual social media practices.

1. We propose categorizing people's sexual social media practices as those of *consuming*, *creating* and *interacting*. The three are connected – consuming often leads to creating and interacting and vice versa. However, allowing these practices on generic social media platforms, instead of relegating them to porn platforms, diversifies the content, fosters open dialogue, and allows sex to be part of everyday life.
2. The gratifications from all three practices routinely exceeded expectation for our participants. Consuming led to becoming better educated, but also increased empathy and appreciation of diversity; creating often started out as entertainment, but became a practice of body awareness, self-acceptance, political activism, and critical engagement with privacy and platform economy; interacting allows experimentation, freedom of expression, and reclaiming one's own sexuality.
3. People's sexual social media practices are highly situational. We argue that platforms are not coherent communicative spaces, but rather that social media use consists of a series of interactional situations (Goffman [1956] 1990). Each situation has its own proprieties. Meanings of a sexy selfie or functions of a dick pic thus depend on the situation, and generalizing claims about platforms or types of content – “dick pics are always ...,” “Instagram is for ... ,” “sexting is never ....” are best avoided.

Our second group of arguments pertain to sexual social media practices as identity work and in particular to the everyday tactics (de Certeau (1988 [1984]) of pushing back against spaces organized by the powerful.

4. Many generic social media platforms collapse contexts, prioritize real names, and/or operate with templates. While we argue above for maintaining sex on generic platforms, we also argue for users to have more control over the audiences of their sexual performances. Compartmentalizing sex is key to our participants. They accomplished this compartmentalization via three tactics: setting up alternative accounts or using alternative platforms, remaining pseudonymous or anonymous, and omitting personal information.
5. Alts, omissions, and pseudonymity allow users to create manageable networks, where sexual people and representations flow in abundance, even if the platform more broadly is better known for images of coffee art or political arguments. This helps users maintain contextual integrity, and control their communicative context through selective disconnection (Light 2014).
6. In our data, increased control over one's audiences and/or being able to (dis)connect the sexual from other facets of one's identity fosters reciprocity, support, and intimacy in exchanges between people.

Finally, the sexual social media practices and the specific tactics contribute to creation of safe spaces and communities that become larger than the sums of their parts.

7. Shared sexual spaces may be of profound value and significance for their members, because they destigmatize sex, make sex a community experience (as opposed to an isolated one), and through this, offer acceptance and self-acceptance. This was a profound experience for many of our participants, who said that prior to finding this, they were sure they were an outlier.
8. Meaningful and valuable sexual social media experiences have the potential for inciting social change. Our participants were part of communities that taught them to question the heteronormativity, body normativity, racism, ableism, and ageism of capitalist cultural arenas, and to act on those critical questions, both on and off social media.
9. If we accept the significance of sexual social media experiences, their deplatforming becomes matter of much broader societal relevance than a private corporation's whim regarding an irrelevant group of "perverts".

Overall, we argue that analyses relying on people's lived experiences mandate a sex-positive but platform-critical approach to sex on social media, where sex deserves to be part of social media for consenting adults.

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