



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2020:
The 22nd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers**
Virtual Event / 13-16 Oct 2021

SPACE, PLACE AND LOCATION IN SEXUAL SOCIAL MEDIA

Jenny Sundén
Södertörn University

Katrin Tiidenberg
Tallinn University

Susanna Paasonen
University of Turku

Maria Vihlman
University of Turku

With the development of digital media in increasingly participatory formats, in tandem with progressively more powerful devices, networks, and platforms, digital modes of sexuality and intimacy have proliferated (Andreassen et al. 2018, Dobson et al. 2018, Paasonen 2017, Sundén 2018, Tiidenberg & van der Nagel 2000). Networked digital devices are more than conduits of desire, but rather intrinsically entwined with the ways in which people form sexual attachments and connections, actively shaping how desire takes form and becomes oriented. Our intimacies with devices and platforms contribute to how we relate to ourselves and others sexually, what we consider sexy, and how we communicate, experiment with, or experience sex in ways that have everything to do with the making of sites of sexual significance.

Contributing to the swiftly emerging field of the geographies of digital sexualities (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2019), this panel explores the geosocial and geopolitical dimensions of digital sexual cultures by zooming in on the connections between sexual practices, geographic imaginaries, and locally embedded social media platforms devoted to sexual expression. The panel builds on a research project about the geopolitics of digital sexual cultures in Estonia, Sweden, and Finland (2020-2022), which focuses on an Estonian platform used primarily by those interested in group sex (LC, est. 2018), a Swedish platform preferred by BDSM practitioners (Darkside.se, est. 2003), and a Finnish platform for nude self-expression (Alastonsuomi.com, est. 2007). Drawing on these case studies consisting of platform walk-throughs, a year of ethnographic observation on the platforms, and interviews with owners, moderators and users, we show how these platforms contribute to, and shape sexual geographies in digital and physical registers. As sexual content and communication are

Suggested Citation (APA): Sundén, J., Tiidenberg, K., Paasonen, S. & Vihlman, M. (2021, October). *Space, place and location in sexual social media*. Panel presented at AoIR 2021: The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Virtual Event: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

increasingly pushed out of large, U.S.-owned social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr, local and (to some extent) independent platforms where sexual expression is much less regulated offer an interesting counterweight.

On the one hand, these platforms operate as spatialized tools which put bodies in motion in the interest of hooking up. The platforms, in this case, function as digital compasses that allow for orientation of sexual desires in material spaces. The digital becomes an apparatus with which to actualize encounters in the flesh, something which in some instances necessitates transnational travels (for example, across the Baltic Sea). On the other hand, these platforms also assemble localized online places for flirtation, imagination, visibility, and appreciation (as well as sexism and harassment), which interlink bodies with the visual pleasures and vulnerabilities of seeing and being seen. In this case, the platforms afford digital placemaking oriented at sexual identity work in specific linguistic and cultural context. We approach questions of locatedness and place-making both through the regional and linguistic boundaries within which these platforms operate, as well as through our participants' sense of comfort and investment in the local as a space of sexual play. Through Nordic and Baltic contexts, we contribute to studies of geosocial hookup apps and research of sex and sexuality in social media by accounting for the importance of language and location in a research context largely dominated by Anglocentric approaches.

Our panel opens up (at least) two important discussions, which we feel resonate with the AoIR community: (1) how geographic imaginaries shape and constrain sexual social media platforms at a political moment when sex is increasingly de-platformed from social media and pushed out of public view in ways that are particularly harmful for sexually marginalized people; and (2) how our examples, when understood as social media platforms, can challenge our understandings of what social media are, how they function, and what kind of sociability they foster. Our panel initiates a discussion of the significance of sex in social media, and the ways in which geography, spatiality, and proximity are key to how social sexual media platforms operate.

CARTOGRAPHIES OF KINK: SLOW CONNECTIVITY AND A SENSE OF SAFETY

Jenny Sundén

Darkside was founded already in 2003 and is the largest Swedish kink and BDSM web community with some 250.000 members, housing social and sexual networking. In stark contrast to large corporate social media platforms, Darkside is virtually non-profit and as such offering an independent platform for non-normative sexualities by providing, as the site states, "love and community in BDSM, kink, sex positivity, fetishism, expressions and lifestyles beyond the prison of normativity." Even if the site is functional in English and other Nordic languages (due to community translation efforts), it is built on and in Swedish, and according to site statistics, it is primarily used by people residing in Sweden. The urban concentration of use is obvious, but there are also small nodes of users spread across the country. Swedish BDSM and kink geographies need to be understood against the background of sexual marginalization. Even if "somasochism" was de-pathologized in Sweden in 2009, it is far from destigmatized. Among the participants, a select few are out and proud BDSM activists and educators, but for most such public openness and outness is not an option. Darkside thus

becomes a vital place where it is, as they put it, easier to breathe, to be brave, to stand tall, to feel kinky, to feel sexual, and to feel normal.

Darkside relates to notions of location and locatedness in a number of overlapping ways. Firstly, it operates as a tool for digital wayfinding, or wayfaring (cf. Hjorth and Pink 2014), for locating sites of sexual play. Secondly, it functions as a temporal device which privileges slow connectivity which temper the pace with which connections are made, highlighting how the question of location may have an important temporal dimension in digital sexual cultures. Finally, it is also a safety device, which helps users negotiate a sense of comfort framed by notions of cultural proximity and intelligibility.

Digital wayfaring

In their everyday use of the platform, Darkside offers the participants a both imaginary and tangible geography, a gateway to a community firmly grounded in physical spaces of play. The platform calendar function is a key feature in the user interviews, a central organizing principle for non-normative desires and an opening to a world in which kink operates as the norm. It provides users with a kink compass of sorts guiding them in their local scene, giving them the coordinates of clubs and events difficult to find otherwise. Darkside is thus less of a tool to locate unknown others as it is a place-making tool: an event finder and a kink map which unlocks more or less hidden physical locations reminiscent of what Dominique Pierre Batiste (2013) calls a queer cartography mapped onto both familiar and strange spaces. The calendar is a pragmatic tool which presents a concrete timeline marking upcoming events, but it is equally a tool of the imagination which outlines the contours of a community always much larger than the community the participants call their own. As a link to this larger, national community, the calendar provides not only a window to local spaces of play, but to kink activities in all of Sweden. This dynamic map of Swedish kink events highlights an (unsurprising) urban concentration, but it also gives ample evidence of, for example, countryside rope gatherings, or a discreet BDSM get together for “fika” on the second level of a small-town pastry shop, subtly re-arranging urban-rural relationality.

Slow connectivity

The use of Darkside as a tool for wayfaring and wayfinding resonates with the use of dating and hookup apps, and yet there is a widespread understanding among the participants that Darkside is, in fact, not a site for dating and hookups. The geolocative capacities of hookup apps are tailored to be used on the go, built on spatio-temporal sexual norms around proximity and immediacy. Such swiftness is noticeably at odds with how acceptance in BDSM and kink communities is a gradual process which involves knowledge, time, and devotion. Further adding to this sense of delay or deferral is the fact that BDSM and kink communities are grounded in semi-public sexual spaces, shared vulnerabilities, and forms of play that *take time*. The platform is in this sense not only a slower version of a hookup app, but also partly resistant to a speedy hookup logic, as well as to those straight, male users that regularly use the platform to seek quick, sexual adventures. Sarah Murray and Megan Sapnar Ankersen (2016) similarly argue that designing for “lesbian contact” in geosocial networking apps is a process that needs to consider not only the social dimension of space, but equally the social dimension of time to also make space for a slower rhythm of imagination and desire. This is not to suggest that queer women (or kinksters) would not also seek out hookups built on

immediacy—indeed several of the participants occasionally use the platform as a jumping off point for play dates with strangers—but it is to draw attention to how there are important temporal elements in digital sexual geographies that have not been accounted for in app design.

A sense of safety

The slow connectivity of Darkside is also a matter of how the participants use the platform to negotiate a sense of safety (see Albury and Byron 2016) in the midst of sexual practices that could be considered risky. The geographical dimension of this safety is intimately tied to the fact that the platform is in Swedish. To feel at home on Darkside is a combination of the site's "Swedishness"—the language, the terminology, the cultural context—and its local embeddedness, as the people you connect with are often close to you geographically. Many participants are part of an international network of kinksters, and they use FetLife (the considerably larger Canadian born transnational social networking site for kinksters) for international kink travels. But things do get lost in translation. A queer female participant recounted how BDSM literature written for the U.S. context never spoke to her directly. She then came across a series of diary entries on Darkside that were chronicling secret play sessions at Ica (a Swedish grocery store), which quite concretely gave her a new way of being with or in her sexuality, a new way of being sexual. It produced an opening, not only to reimagine the most mundane of places as having kink potential, but it also rendered her desire intelligible. It became real. The cultural proximity of the grocery store thus came to relate quite concretely to intelligibility in a Butlerian sense (Butler 2004) in so far as the platform becomes a place where the participants feel they make sense, or even exist. Even in a supposedly sexually liberated nation like Sweden, there are clear limits for what constitutes intelligible desires and lives.

LIBERTINE IMAGINARIES OF PLACE AND PLATFORM

Katrin Tiidenberg

Based on observation and walkthrough of and on Libertine Center (LC) - an Estonian-founded "social media network for open-minded adults" - as well as interviews with its founders and users, this paper explores the geo-sexual imaginaries that the platform affords. Specifically, I focus on the imaginaries (1) of geographical places, (2) of the platform generated "kinky places," and (3) of the platform as a techno-sexual place that hopes to generate a particular version of sexual liberation.

On-platform geo-sexual imaginaries emerge from the intersections of platform features, affordances, use practices and cultures. They are, in turn, shaped by the broader, culturally ingrained social imaginaries pertaining to geography, sexuality and the internet. Conceptually, I draw on Charles Taylor's approach to social imaginaries (2004), on work extending his ideas to study how shared meanings regarding technology circulate (Hereman 2010, Trere 2019, Markham 2020); and on Jennifer Robinson's idea of geographical imagination (2011). Thus, I operationalize on-platform geo-sexual imaginaries as shared perceptions, meanings and knowledges about placeness and sex and placeness of sex that emerge on and circulate from LC. They function as "pragmatic templates for social practice" (Herman 2010, 190), illuminating the otherwise tacit perceptions and norms.

Context

LC was founded in 2018 and currently has about 50 000 users (population of Estonia is 1.3 million), of whom 70% are from Estonia. Adults interested in a variety of sexual lifestyles and practices are welcome and present on the platform, but ‘Swinger’ (a category only available to those who sign up as a couple) is currently the most popular, followed by ‘Libertine’ (available to single and couple profiles). Thus, users interested in variations of partner swapping and group sex are the dominant group on LC. Every user has to choose one category from 20 + upon registration, and the list from which to choose depends on the gender and couple status chosen (options include M, F, Trans, M+F, M+M, F+F couples).

Geo-sexual imaginaries on LC

Perhaps the most productive *geographical imaginary* on the platform is about an ambivalently sized Estonia that is both *too small and not small enough*. This imaginary collapses the size of the population, the area of the country and the function of LC. Thus, the size of Estonia’s population introduces particular risks into how LC is used both as a sexual place and as a tool for sexually organizing and inhabiting a geographic area. The small population limits the number of lifestylers, but also makes it more likely that one will be recognized where they don’t want to be. This shapes how people use LC (e.g. what kinds of images or information is shared) and their sexual practices (e.g. the process of screening potential contacts). At the same time many of my interviewee’s articulated the fallacy of the popular statement that Estonia is small enough to easily drive from one end to the other. Rather, for a practicing “lifestyler” even someone 50 km away tends to be too far, dividing the geographical area of Estonia into lifestyle specific chunks, with very different lifestyler populations and thus different expectations to the platform as a tool. Those who live outside of the two biggest cities imagine and practice the platform as more place-like (to hang out, play in the image competition, browse), while those who live in the capital experience LC more as a tool.

The second geo-sexual imaginary LC affords is that of *kinky places*. LC was born from founders’ personal frustration with how difficult it was to find lifestyle friendly beaches when they were travelling internationally, so users are incentivized (they receive platform specific tokens) to submit “community friendly locations” into a specific menu item on the site. The current list of kinky locations includes 77 entries from 20 countries, most of which are sex-clubs and nude beaches. The platform thus invites users to imagine places as “kinky,” and in some cases to overwrite certain places to make them “community friendly.” This links to a material practice known as “takeovers”. During takeovers resorts and hotels are rented out and used in lifestyle specific ways (usually including temporary suspension of rules regarding public nudity and sex). However, the imaginary of *kinky locations* extends the feature as users continue reimagining places as sexual in personals and chat group themes. Thus, “out of the city” - a common Estonian geo-social imaginary for the summer season takes on a sexual overtone and becomes a *kinky location*, as do spas and saunas. Some chat groups are imagined as kinky locations, e.g. when groups are set up for “webcamming,” or “voyeurism, exhibitionism.”

Finally, LC affords a geo-sexual imaginary of it as a *socio-sexual place that puts forth a particular version sexual liberation*. As mentioned above, the platform describes itself as a

“social media network for *open-minded* adults.” Open-minded is a direct and somewhat clumsy translation of the Estonian word “vabameelne,” which dictionaries translate as “liberal,” but is used primarily as sexually “free spirited” or “libertine.” LC users regularly refer to themselves, the people they are looking to meet, and to the shared culture on LC as “vabameelne” (including in the quoted snippets above, where I translated it to free spirited). Despite having resorted to the direct translation on the “about page,” LC is making a concentrated effort to introduce the imaginary of and the term of Libertine. Beyond the platform name, Libertine as a category users can choose when signing up comes with an explanation:

“Libertine is an extreme form of hedonism. Sexually almost everything goes. Libertines care very little about social, moral or common values. They may practice open marriage / relationship, swinging, flashing, voyeurism, cuckolding or any other less traditional sexual behaviors. This does not mean they do not have any boundaries. The word "Libertine" originates in the Latin for 'free'. Since the real definition of libertine is yet publicly unknown most of us call them swingers.”

In an interview one of the founders revealed that they are introducing the word Libertine, because “*the term swinger has kind of been branded ...*” and that the platform prefers all those who don’t know which category to choose or who’d like to choose more than one to choose Libertine. Contextualizing this in broader ambitions for the platform, it becomes clear that Libertine is introduced to overhaul the swinging lifestyle as more glamorous and youthful and to detach it from the social imaginaries presumed to be linked to “swinging.” While Libertine is the second most popular category on the platform and my interviewees all elevated “vabameelus,” as a platform specific norm, there seems to be some confusion lingering around the Libertine label, where some users feel that self-labeling as a Libertine presumes a level of sexual liberation they have yet to achieve despite actively partaking in a variety of practices.

THE SPACES AND PLACES OF “NAKED FINLAND”

Susanna Paasonen & Maria Vihlman

Launched in 2007, Alastonsuomi.com (i.e., “Naked Finland”) is an online image gallery and social networking site originally created as an adult version of IRC Galleria – a local pre-Facebook social media market leader known for its strict content policy pertaining to nudity and sex. As one of the Alastonsuomi founders explains, the rationale was to “create a similar site where you *must* show naked pictures”. Initially a DIY enterprise, or even “kind of a joke”, the site grew rapidly as surprisingly “many want to show off their nuts and tits for free online to everyone”. With over 100,000 registered users at the time of this writing, Alastonsuomi is an established brand with free and premium memberships.

As the site’s name suggests, the concept of Alastonsuomi is firmly local in the regional marker of a nation-state (Finland), as well as in its main language of operation (Finnish). If, in terms of geopolitical imaginaries, a nation-states territory can be considered a “container” filled with specific meanings through processes of nation-building (Häkli 1999, 124; Paasi 1992), Alastonsuomi both builds on existing imaginaries and reshapes them in its abundant and explicit displays of naked bodies, bodily fluids and fetishes.

Through the marker of “Finland”, the site performs territorial, linguistic and cultural boundary work in terms of its assumed members and users; through the marker of nudity, it defines undress as the default mode of social relating. As an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), it joins users together into something of a nation exposed, or a nation where belonging is defined in terms of naked displays and exchanges, making room for unclothed self-expression in a region where, as one participant pointed out, showing skin in public is complicated due to the climate alone.

Within human geography, space is generally understood as abstract, as opposed to place filled with cultural and social meaning through human action. Thinking through spatial structures in CSCW (computer-supported cooperative work) Paul Dourish (2006, 301) argues that the distinction does not stand when considering virtual spaces that are designed with certain needs and opportunities in mind so that they structure social action. Furthermore, Dourish is interested in how networked technologies can make people re-encounter everyday space by not merely creating places for sociality but by transforming our ways of relating to, and understanding these spaces. Following this line of thinking, this paper asks how the “space” of Alastonsuomi, designed with certain purposes, functions and forms of action in mind, works with and through mundane locations, spaces and places.

Belonging through imagined Finnishness and sexual liberation

For some users, the platform’s manifest regional specificity breeds a sense of intimacy of the kind that they believe would be more difficult to achieve on internationally operating services. According to one participant, such intimacy is connected to trust felt toward fellow users and, should something unwanted happen on the platform, toward the moderators. Here, an analogy was drawn to the comparable to high levels of trust within Finland toward public institutions and organizations, such as the police (cf. Kääriäinen 2008). For others, it is the specificity of relating through nudity or erotic self-expression that fosters a sense of intimacy, community and freedom, centrally expressed as involving freedom from shame. The platform’s sex-positive ambiance allows for vicarious courage, enabling spaces for exploring novel pleasures and ways of connecting. The ability to move affectively and spatially from places of shame towards places of belonging is, for many, a profoundly powerful experience.

While the first framing positions the presumed Finnishness of Alastonsuomi as an issue of shared cultural codes and degrees of safety, the latter helps to articulate the platform as a site of liberation from the kinds of social norms and hierarchies that delimit sexual expression, bodily visibility and the articulation of desires in the society at large. The platform brings together people from different local places and backgrounds, enabling intense feelings of affiliation – as well as those of ostracism. In the current political climate of anti-immigration activism and national populism where definitions of Finnishness come embedded in exclusive, even ethnonationalist notions of belonging (Pantti et al. 2019), Alastonsuomi is both inclusive in the range of bodies it features and, similarly to other social media platforms, facilitates practices of segregation. It remains crucial to ask *whose* sense of belonging or trust is stronger and which users may be excluded from networks of sociability and exchange dependent on cultural codes and conventions one is assumed to share.

Connecting to, and transcending the local

Both the visual landscape and the uses of Alastonsuomi are tightly connected to physical locations that it simultaneously transcends. In visual sexual place-making, people pose in city parks, in forests, at summer cottages and by lakesides, transforming mundane spaces – simultaneously recognizable and generic – into sites of exhibitionism, cross-dressing, group sex and kink play. In the visual economy of Alastonsuomi, a quotidian, generic signifier such as a dick pic can gain local recognizability through its proximity to cultural markers allowing for a sense of familiarity without compromising anonymity. This regional recognizability, combined with users' general anonymity, adds to voyeuristic pleasure connected to potential spatial proximity that manifests in the titillating thought that “it could be anyone” – or, more precisely, “it could be someone next door”. Finland being a small country, this may indeed be the case. The downside of this involves the heightened possibility of being identified against one's will – a risk that users are actively aware of, yet willing to take since.

Alastonsuomi operates as a site for hooking up and otherwise connecting with others off-platform but it is equally a site for being seen, and seeing within the confines of the platform itself. Many users publish their region or place of residence so that their bodily displays, scenes of sexual play and preferred places for meeting up become anchored in identifiable locations. As with hookup apps, incongruence between the reported and factual places of residence can also be used strategically to strengthen anonymity and safety (Breitschuh & Göretz 2019; Albury & Byron 2016). As in any country, physical locations are connected to possibilities for sexual expression and relationship-making, as there is generally more room for alternative sexualities in metropolitan areas than in rural ones, or in regions where the prevalence of conservative Christianity is comparatively high (e.g., Gray 2009). For someone whose sexuality conflicts with the norms of their immediate local community, a sex-positive platform can be a lifeline allowing for sex education, peer support, embodied and erotic self-expression, and the possibility of gathering in a safer space – be this a digital one, or a place that one enters fully in the flesh.

We argue that Alastonsuomi comprises a spatial sexualizing technology on multiple interconnected levels: as a digital space for sexual exchange and for locally meeting up; as a tool for re-signifying both recognizable locations and those representing the more generically “Finnish” as sites for nudity and sex; as well as for sexualizing the notion of the Finnish nation-state itself. Being a “container” in itself, filled with meanings relating to both territorial and national imaginaries that position the platform's users along the lines of proximity and distance, Alastonsuomi contributes to boundary-work of spatial, cultural and national belonging.

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