



Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

DIGITAL KINK OPACITY: SEXUAL SOCIAL MEDIA BEYOND VISIBILITY AND COMPREHENSION

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Building on and expanding discussions of the value of anonymity and pseudonymity in digital cultures in general (Hogan 2012, Marwick & boyd 2011, van der Nagel 2017, van der Nagel & Frith 2015), and in queer digital cultures in particular (e.g. Cassidy 2013, Dhoest & Szulc 2016), this paper explores notions of opacity as modes of resistance to dominating regimes of visibility on and beyond social media platforms. Across queer, postcolonial and digital media theorizing, opacity provides a way of thinking through the tension between the visible and the invisible, challenging the idea of public visibility and identification as that which drives data cultures and legitimizes deviant sexual practices and expressions. In line with discussions of tactical, queer uses of social media in terms of, for example, disconnection (Light 2014, Sundén 2018), reluctance (Cassidy 2018) and invisibility (Tudor 2018), opacity affords yet another way of theorizing resistance to platform power and user control. When large social media platforms keep careful track of their users' identities and movements for the sake of algorithmic capture, to refrain from transparent identification can be a radical act (cf. Birchall 2021, Blas 2014, 2018).

Based on an ethnographic study of the Swedish digital BDSM, fetish and kink platform Darkside, this paper theorizes opacity in two ways: first, as a way of discussing tactical uses of Darkside between modes of revealing and concealing, and second, as a way of conceptualizing the platform as a borderland between intelligibility and unintelligibility. Sexual liberation is often understood in a framework of progressive, Western modernity and particular forms of public visibility and pride, whereas a lack thereof is inevitably linked to oppression, secrecy and closeted shame. And yet, a focus on public visibility as the universally empowering method of progressive sexual politics and as grounds for recognition obscures the significance of sexual expressions that are marginal, ephemeral and less than public, or public in other, more subtle ways (cf. Edenborg 2017, Stella 2012).

Swedish kink communities are at once marginalized and seemingly mainstream, navigating a tricky balance between pop cultural visibility and lingering stigma. Digital practices on Darkside are usually neither about concealed, closeted shame, nor an

Suggested citation: Sundén, Jenny (2022, November). *Digital kink opacity: Sexual social media beyond visibility and comprehension*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

unequivocal desire for full transparency and public recognition. While governed by activist visions of proud openness, the platform primarily takes shape through tactical investments in obscure, partly concealed, but nonetheless proud forms of kink expression. Darkside provides an opening for shared vulnerability and collective forms of 'radical secrecy' (Birchall 2021), which grants both privacy and degrees of public kink visibility to its members. Then again, the users are highly aware of the permeable boundaries of platforms. Pictures are thus routinely cropped, angled or blurred in ways that make identification difficult. By moving between modes of revealing and concealing, sexual expressions on Darkside resonate with what Nicholas De Villiers (2012) terms 'queer opacity.' Opacity, here, is as a set of queer tactics which challenge the binary construction of the closet and by resisting legitimization via public outness invent new forms of illegible sexual expression (see also Uibo 2021, 156-185).

In the work of the Caribbean writer, poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant (1997), opacity is a similar tactic of the oppressed. Glissant argues that the understanding and acceptance of the other within Western thought is based on transparency and measured against an ideal, normative scale which inevitably reduces the other. He therefore insists on the need to "clamor for the right to opacity for everyone," referring to an ontological right of the oppressed to be non-transparent, non-categorizable, not fully understood and simply exist as different (Glissant 1997, 194). This right to opacity is a form of resistance to surveillance and imperial domination, which within digital media studies has spurred discussions on resistance against data-driven surveillance technologies through forms of concealment and camouflage (see Birchall 2016, Blas 2014, de Vries & Schinkel 2019).

Opacity implies a lack of clarity; something opaque may be both difficult to see clearly as well as to understand. Kink communities exist to a large extent in such spaces of dimness, darkness and incomprehensibility, partly removed from public view and, importantly, from public understanding. Kink certainly enters the bright daylight of public visibility in some ways, most obviously through popular culture. And yet, there is something utterly incomprehensible about how desire works, something which tends to become heightened in the realm of kink as non-practitioners may struggle to 'understand.' By exceeding categories of identifiable difference, or of identification altogether, a digital sexual politics of opacity could help provide recognition without a demand to fully understand sexual otherness. Opacity here works to overcome the risk of reducing, normalizing and assimilating sexual deviance by comprehension, and instead open up for new modes of obscure and pleasurable sexual expressions and transgressions on social media platforms.

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