RETHINKING THE SOCIAL IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Jenny Sundén
Södertörn University

Susanna Paasonen
University of Turku

Katrin Tiidenberg
Tallinn University

Maria Vihlman
University of Turku

This paper makes an argument for the value of including sexual sites in definitions and analyses of social media. General purpose social media platforms— often incited by American legislation—broadly and routinely exclude sex from acceptable forms of sociality in the abstract name of user safety (Paasonen et al. 2019). While academics and activists have consistently argued that deplatforming of sex does more harm than good (Blunt et al 2021), the collective imaginaries of what sex positive social media (Stardust et al 2022) would look like, and whether one is even possible / desirable remain uncertain (Anderson 2022).

This presentation analyzes interview data (four developer interviews and 56 user interviews) from three North European sexual platforms (Darkside, Alastonsuomi and Libertine.Center) devoted to nudity, sex, and kink in order to rethink the social in social media. We ask, what does it mean to define sex platforms as *social media*? What analytical avenues does the inclusion of sexual sites open up for understanding forms of sociability within them? And what can such a framing add to our understanding of social media and the social more generally? Our analysis is threefold. We start by mapping the studied platforms as built infrastructures that shape and constrain sociality, with a particular focus on developer dialogue with the broader social media ecosystem. We then discuss how these built spaces are used and experienced as "socio-sexual silos" with a particular focus on notions of safety. Finally, we consider what this means for sociality on social media and propose "context promiscuity" as a conceptual aid for unpacking this.

Built infrastructures that shape and constrain sociality

The platforms we study build and afford sociality through affinities centered on sexual desire. Within them, sexuality is understood neither as harmful by default nor as a surplus in social lives, but rather as something that drives and shapes sociality. As built infrastructures they emulate (Rudmark 2021) and remix elements from generic platforms in their functionalities and governance principles while also expanding their affordances for sexual ends. Despite the sociality offered by mainstream social media prescribing a strikingly normative model of the sexual that relegates it from networked publics to more hidden or private realms (Bivens, 2017), our three platforms have taken shaped in emulative dialogue with it. This emulation takes multiple forms: Darkside (the Swedish BDSM site) adopted a news feed and Libertine.Center (the Estonian non-monogamy platform) a process of user verification because the developers liked those features on generic platforms, or presumed the platform vernaculars they liked elsewhere to stem from particular features. We call this *imitating emulation*. For its part, Alastonsuomi (the Finnish naked self-presentation site) was set up as an inversion of a sex-negative, but otherwise popular Finnish image gallery in what we identify as *rejective emulation*. Finally, Libertine.Center built a partial functionality chat app since due to the developer assumption that these features are mandatory within the current social media ecosystem, and without them users would reject the platform; this we call *contextual emulation*.

Socio-sexual silos

On our platforms, social exchanges are framed on sexual terms by default and users can look for hook-ups, play dates or simply at each other. This yields particular types of sexual sociality experienced as more social than those of sex-only platforms but also as more sexual and intensely social than those of generic social media platforms. This, we argue, points to silosocial experiences (Tiidenberg et al. 2021) within social media ecosystems where technologies, corporate interests, individual and group practices, norms, and ideas converge in ways accommodating certain degrees and types of sexual display and exchange.

Our interviews speak of the felt value of sexual social media platforms as sites of seeing and being seen, and learning about sexual selves and the sexual tastes of others. Most significantly, it speaks of the value of the social transcending default boundaries separating the sexual (which may or may not be experienced as intimate) from mundane sociality – of the importance of sites "where we can, in one moment, talk about last night's sex experiences and, in another, about someone having a good recipe for buns." Our study participants speak of sexuality as fundamental to how social bonds take shape and of the importance, gravity, pleasure, and ease of connecting with others similarly attuned. The data helps to map out alternative analytical approaches to the perceived risks and harms of social media, ones expanding to crucial things lost when ousting sex from networked forms of sociality.

Context promiscuity

While social media research has largely been invested in analyzing individual platforms, there is also a growing discussion of how users move between them in promiscuous ways, giving shape to social media ecologies both complex and habitual (Payne 2015; Taffel 2019). Our study participants describe constant balancing between privacy and publicness as they move from explicitly sexual social media platforms to more mainstream ones, as they manage their respective profiles, and as they build and foster connections and disconnections across platforms. Building on this, we propose thinking of sexual expression as something not contained by, but put in motion across platforms, user cultures, content policies, and sexual norms.

In attending to this cross-platform traffic enacted by our participants, we re-examine the notion of "context collapse" (Marwick and boyd 2011) broadly used to conceptualize how generic social media disafford social boundary work. Our data highlights how strategic audience segregation meets leaky boundaries and how content and data bleeds occur in social media presence. Rather than furthering a context collapse, our participants experience and enact this "context promiscuity" – a partially deliberate blending of contexts that nevertheless maintains their structural integrity.

Conclusion

We argue that the removal of sex from social media drastically delimits ways of being social: it further truncates ways of understanding what makes the self and what interests, forces, and attachments drive people on levels both individual and collective. Such truncation disproportionally targets sexual cultures, practices, and identities already deemed marginal, such as the self-proclaimed "perverts," kinksters, swingers, cross-dressers, and exhibitionists we interviewed.

Attempts to make social media safer do not then necessitate the default effacement of sex: rather, users should be able to opt both in and out of sexual content across platforms. Such an approach involves foregrounding sexual ethics and sexual rights in how safety becomes understood and advanced in the first place. Learning from the experiences and practices of sexual platforms is one means toward understanding the value of networked sexual sociality, its risks, and its possibilities. In our study, users of different ages, genders, sexual orientations, ethnicities, and bodily abilities and sizes address safety and unsafety as connected to the creation of social and content silos, nuanced negotiations over consent, and tactical forms of platform promiscuity.

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