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## **MAKING AND BREAKING RULES ON THE INTERNET**

Katrin Tiidenberg  
Aarhus University, Postdoctoral Researcher,

Crystal Abidin  
National University of Singapore, Postdoctoral Fellow in Sociology

Andra Siibak  
University of Tartu, Professor of Media Studies

### **Panel rationale**

This panel explores how social norms get troubled and rewritten on social media. It brings together three presentations, all of which speak to the central conference theme by engaging with how specific rules and norms regarding privacy, friendship, shame and commodification are appropriated, rejected or transformed. We analyze the rule breaking and rule making through social media practices like teacher-student interactions on Facebook, friendship and flirting on Tumblr, microcelebrity attention seeking practices and self-presentation on different social networking sites.

Our arguments are predicated on the well established sociological reasoning that rules for any conduct are discovered, created and sustained by social actors through their everyday practices, and become particularly visible, when broken (Garfinkel, 1967). We also rely on the thesis that different groups differ on “what behaviors are normative and which are not” (Ren et al 2010: 125), thus a specific group’s cohesion may rely on explicit or implicit questioning of an otherwise widely accepted norm. The latter is particularly relevant for analyzing human coexistence in digital contexts. While “social media constitute an arena of public communication where norms are shaped and rules get contested,” (van Dijck, 2013:19), there are no universally applicable norms and values that apply to the internet as a space (Albrechtslund, 2008). We argue that it thus becomes a particularly fertile space for groups and communities to negotiate “constitutive rules,” which “create the possibility of the very behavior that they regulate” (Searle, 2009: 10).

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Our empirical data is geographically and culturally broad, ranging from a study of lifestyle Influencers in Singapore, schoolteachers and students in Estonia and sex-bloggers in the USA. Based on it we interrogate the interconnections of social media practices, wider social norms and platform affordances to offer explanations, descriptions and provocations on how breaking norms can be a calculated strategy to capture attention (*Sorry not sorry: influencers, exposés, and para-apologetic transgressions*); an outcome of the practices and socio-technical affordances of a particular community (*Queering friendships - blurred lines of relationships on tumblr*); or how lines are being drawn in the sand of what constitutes acceptable social media behavior for teachers and students (Nightmare readers and double standards – the case of teacher-student interactions on Facebook).

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## QUEERING FRIENDSHIPS - BLURRED RELATIONSHIP RULES ON TUMBLR

Katrin Tiidenberg  
Postdoctoral Researcher, Aarhus University

Personal relationships have been going through considerable changes in the post-traditional social order (Budgeon, 2006), and friendship in particular, is considered both definitionally ambiguous, and having significantly transformed over the past decades. Most definitions of friendship reflect the widely accepted social rule that friends are not sexually intimate or romantically interested in one-another (Bisson & Levine, 2009). There are forms of friendship (e.g. 'friends with

benefits'; and 'passionate friendships') that challenge these assumptions, but the prevalent focus on non-sexual and non-romantic friendships in both research and popular discourse indicates a persistent normative link between friendship and (heteronormative) social order.

This presentation looks at a specific type of relationship that blurs friendship with flirtation, and thus bends or breaks multiple social rules surrounding both. Based on five years of fieldwork (2011 – 2015) and additional friendship-related interviews (in 2016) with a community of sexy-selfie enthusiasts on Tumblr, these "flirtationships" appear to be quite common, yet Tumblr-specific (not practiced elsewhere). Relying on the argument that social media platforms can foster or hinder particular practices and transform social norms (van Dijck, 2013), I explore how flirtationships become possible in this Tumblr community, and what the potential normative implications of flirtationships are.

### **Relationships and the internet**

Adams and Allan (1998: 12) emphasize the need to look at how factors outside friendships influence their organization and people's understanding of them. This is perhaps particularly relevant to understanding digitally mediated friendships and the role platforms have in their development, maintenance and transformation. While it has been well recorded, that people "can and do develop meaningful personal relationships online" (Baym, 2010: 131), there is less consensus on the character of those relationships. Some authors (Henderson & Gilding, 2004) claim that online friendships are pure in Giddensian sense; based on trust, intimacy and a shared interest; while others (Chan & Cheng, 2004) worry that online friendships are less deep than their offline equivalents.

Internet use for flirting and finding sexual partners is equally well researched (cf. Albright 2008), and it has been argued, that online interaction affords gender bending, queering, as well as an "exponential expansion in the means of recreating conventional hierarchies of sexuality and gender" (Jamieson, 2003:22).

### **Tumblr flirtationships**

There are various personal relationships that have started on Tumblr for my informants – acquaintanceships, friendships, long- and short-term romantic and/or sexual relationships, even a marriage. In addition to those, however, many of my informants have spoken about a relational category that blends aspects of friendship (psychological intimacy, shared interests, support) with

sexual or romantic interest. I call these “flirtationships.” Informants mostly describe these as mid-, to long-term, friendly relationships that include an additional layer of physical and/or emotional attraction. Flirtationships are practiced through a combination of friendly interaction and explicit flirting (complimenting, sexting, sending gifts); may but do not necessarily involve a public aspect of performing affection via participants’ blogs; and are experienced as inhabiting a *“sweet in the middle spot that is respectful, but not too much responsibility.”*

### **Why Tumblr?**

My informants pointed to the explicit sexuality of the Not Safe For Work Tumblr space; the shared ideology of body-positivity of the sexy-selfie community (cf. Tiidenberg 2015); and the commonness of unfiltered and raw diaristic blogging style as the social affordances for flirtationships on Tumblr. While my informants mostly experience the above as guiding the content and interaction style possible on Tumblr, it is also indicative of the fact that this is an explicitly non-normative cultural space (public nudity, self-sexualization, feminist politics) where the relevance of some social rules is already questioned. In addition, I would argue that some of the platforms’ technical affordances (i.e. the ‘reblog’ button and the resulting possibility of identity claims through curation) may facilitate rule breaking.

### **Flirtationships and queering friendship**

The heterosexual flirtationships my informants described are perhaps closest to the “friends with benefits” category, and its assemblage of broken or supplanted social rules. However, my female informants said to prefer flirtationships with other women, and my male informants admitted to having had flirtationships with other men. In addition, these flirtationships do not usually come with an expectation of exclusivity; in fact one of my informants has what she lovingly refers to as a “Tumblr harem.”

Existing literature on women’s passionate friendships often explains those as sexual identity experimentation (cf. Morgan & Morgan Thompson, 2006), thus implying an impending change in the participants’ relationship type and/or sexual identity. While my male informants did link having queer flirtationships to exploring their sexual desires, the focus was on satisfying a known or assumed need, and they are not expecting a transition of any kind. My female informants, conversely, outright rejected the interpretation of experimentation, and instead linked their preference for queer flirtationships to the following:

- a. A sense of safety. Anna: “*A woman will not call you a bitch or accuse you of leading her on, because you flirted with her.*”
- b. A presumption of respect. Katie: “*I just feel that the interactions I get from women are more along the lines of “I admire you, or I’m inspired by you,” and I do get those messages from men, but it’s by far skewed towards women.*”
- c. Pace of interaction. Katie: “*It has to do with penises more than anything else. And this is an obvious generalization, but I feel like women are more capable of taking things slow, people with penises tend to have a more pressing need to take things forward fast.*”
- d. Body positivity and feminist sisterhood. Anna: “*It’s so hard to be a woman, the only way to push back against that is to let people know that what they have is attractive. To not do that is almost a betrayal of a relationship, because you are invested in another person’s physical and mental wellbeing.*”

Thus these Tumblr-flirtationships seem to embody a breaking or bending of rules of mixed-gender friendships (lack of intimacy or post-intimacy redefinition of relationship) and same-gender friendships (lack of intimacy or post intimacy redefinition of sexual identity), while a new set of rules about the flirtationship as such emerge. These seem to reflect the tacit rules of assumed trust, respectful interaction and body positivity particular to this Tumblr community. I would thus ask whether these Tumblr-flirtationships can be said to rework the “heteronormative culture in which the heterosexual couple has occupied a position of central importance” (Budgeon, 2006: ¶ 5.4).

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## **SORRY NOT SORRY: INFLUENCERS, SHAMELEBRITY, AND PARA-APOLOGETIC TRANSGRESSIONS**

Crystal Abidin  
Postdoctoral Fellow in Sociology, National University of Singapore

### **Introduction**

From Belle Gibson's cancer hoax to Essena O'Neill's emotional breakdown, young women Influencers have been making recent headlines for violating socio-cultural norms in the business. However, a subset of lifestyle Influencers in Singapore, where the industry has been rapidly growing since its debut in 2005, has long been playing with mores as calculated strategies to capture the attention of followers, albeit to varying success. Drawing on case studies from ethnographic fieldwork with Influencers in Singapore between 2011 and 2015, this paper assesses a spectrum of Influencer transgressions (lies, faux pas, risky strategies) among prolific 'shamelebrities'. At the intersection of studies on the attention economy and anthropological understandings of shame, the paper analyses the exposé cycles in which Influencers engage as forms of 'para-

apologetic transgressions', where apologies, repentance, and self-consolation are spectacularized into clickbait and diffused by web amnesia.

### **Attention and Pseudo-events**

In the age of abundant information and labor, attention is a scarce commodity (Goldhaber 1997). Attention can be "voluntary" and "captive", wherein one gives attention out of choice or not; "attractive" and "aversive", wherein one gives attention for gains or to avoid loss; and "front-of-mind" and "back-of-mind", wherein one gives attention explicitly and consciously or out of habit (Davenport & Beck, 2001, p. 22-24). As one form of multi-media microcelebrity (Abidin, 2015; Senft, 2008) whose attraction is premised on packaging the personal, ordinary, and mundane of everyday life as sellable commodities, Influencers command a passive form of voluntary, attractive, and back-of-mind attention from their stable stream of followers. However, the 'shamelebility' Influencers discussed in this chapter engage in spectacle-like practices to generate an active form of captive, aversive, and front-of-mind attention to recapture the foci of existing followers and attract new ones. Boorstin (1961, p. 9-12) describes the orchestrated spectacles I observe as "pseudo-events": "news" that is generated as a "synthetic novelty", that is not spontaneous but staged, executed for the mere purpose of creating "newsworthy" content, bears an ambiguous representation of the reality of events, and most crucially, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

### **Shame and Shamelebility**

Based upon some key anthropological works on shame and its associated rituals. I have characterized shame into three functional categories: "weaponized shame", "reflexive shame", and "vernacular shame", as determined by their functions within a social group:

- 1) "Weaponized shame" is directed outwards towards an external other, and conferred onto individuals as a mode of punitive sanction (cf Armstrong, 1988; Young, 1971).
- 2) "Reflexive shame" is directed inwards towards the self, as a form of reflexive guilt to incite self-correcting behavior (cf Williams, 1930; Young, 1971).
- 3) "Vernacular shame" is a boundary marker that demarcates in- and out-groups, and signifies status designations within a community (cf Hogbin, 1947; Peletz, 1996).

Influencers of modern day Singapore engage in all three categories of shame practices depending on their self-shaming practices, but the shame discussed

here is not experienced as a bodily affect (Probyn, 2005), nor do the Influencers seem ashamed of their actions (Wong & Tsai, 2007). Instead, shame is performed and utilized as a commodity that adds value to an Influencer as “shamelebrities”.

English Professor Twitchell coined “shamelebrity” to define someone who

“is not a villain or even an antihero. He, or she, is simply someone who has done something wrong, often something shameful, and is able, with the help of press agents, tabloids, publicists, fanzines, and managers, to make the act into a sequence of images, a salable commodity” (1997, p. 100).

I apply Twitchell’s notion of shamelebrity to Influencers in a different socio-technical context: Unlike shamelebrity of the 1990s who use televisual media, rely on a backend production stable, stumble into shame through exposure, focus on a crossover from shamehood to celebritydom, and use “reflexive shame”, Influencers are shamelebrity of the 2010s who use multi-platform social media, rely on their self-made digital savvy, intentionally solicit self-shaming, continually reconstitute themselves within a shame space, and use “weaponized shame”.

## Exposé cycles

In my talk, I will present vignettes from one of Singapore’s most prolific shamelebrity Influencers, Xiaxue. Most of Xiaxue’s shaming practices are directed to specific individuals (i.e. fellow Influencers) or to specific groups of people (i.e. the disabled, foreign workers, haters). However, the shaming become self-directed in that her stance and opinions are often controversial, quickly polarizing followers into camps comprising supporters and haters. Haters and the general public usually decry her actions, with which she engages by taking on the bad press, standing her ground, and responding with heated and argumentative retorts. Many of her supporters have been known to initiate smear campaigns against other Influencers and followers who criticize the Influencer. They also fight against criticism on her behalf and defend her, thus exacerbating the “hating”. Additionally, Xiaxue has also publicly admitted to engaging in controversy for publicity, such as in her “kissing a girl” video. Curiously, perhaps in part due to the extent of her influence, press coverage on Xiaxue’s shaming practices usually adopt a reportage style, and if bearing critique, often cite public opinion on various social media platforms rather than offer an opinion from the reporter per se.

Anthropologically, the exposé cycles of Influencers like Xiaxue bear some semblances to what Victor Turner (1974, p. 33, 37) has termed “social dramas” – “public episodes of tensional irruption” in which conflict arises from “aharmonic” or “disharmonic” processes. My talk will show how Xiaxue’s shamelebility practices mirror the four main phases of social dramas (p. 37-43): 1) “overt breach or deliberate nonfulfillment” of “norm-governed social relations”; 2) escalation of the crisis causing a reordering of social relations; 3) redressive action initiated by “representative members of the disturbed social system”; and 4) “reintegration of the disturbed social group” or “the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties”.

### **Para-apologetic transgressions**

In my personal interviews, Influencers weighed in on shamelebility rituals as effective but harming attention strategies. Many agreed that “it is very important to stay relevant”, that they “want to remain talked about”, and that they want to “differentiate” themselves from others. Yet, they also value the ability to dissociate themselves from deviance over time. While not always explicitly expressed, many Influencers make references to the sentiment of “forgetting”, or what I term “web amnesia”.

Unlike scholarly discussions that describe the infrastructure and technology of the Internet as one that “never forgets” (Rosen, 2011) in light of data retention tendencies, “web amnesia” is focused on the social effects followers experience in the age of abundant data (Goldhaber, 1997). I posit here three vernacular understandings of web amnesia that have emerged from my personal interviews and observations:

- 1) In the abundance of increasing volumes of content produced via the addition of new social media, spectacles and trends experience a high turnover rate. Thus, shamelebility practices easily lose the impact capacity to wrestle attention.
- 2) There are typically several simultaneous shamelebility attempts in any given period of time, colliding and appealing to different segments of Internet users. Thus, shamelebility practices often chance into national and regional virality by timing or plain luck.
- 3) New genres of self-shaming practices are proliferating as Influencers pioneer new forms of click bait (Blom & Hansen, 2015). Thus, shamelebility practices constantly shift moral boundaries of mores and taboo as followers grow desensitized to old scandals.

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## **NIGHTMARE READERS AND DOUBLE STANDARDS – THE CASE OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTIONS ON FACEBOOK**

Andra Siibak

Professor of Media Studies, University of Tartu

Electronic media has thoroughly blurred the boundaries between the public and the private. According to Westin (1968) privacy is an individual's right to decide when, how and how much information about oneself is communicated to the others. However, in the mutual surveillance on social media all participants have different understanding of what is correct and incorrect, what is perceived to be normal and abnormal, private and public. Furthermore, as to a large extent, the internet lacks universally applicable laws or even shared norms and values (Albrechtslund, 2008).

Due to the context collapse in networked publics, students and teachers have suddenly gained access to each other's information which previously was considered private (Murumaa-Mengel & Siibak, 2014). Teachers play a unique role in shaping the minds of the students and are thus usually held to higher standard of professionalism and moral character. In fact, "uprightness of character" (Lumpkin, 2008: 46) is expected of teachers even during off-duty times (Foulger et al., 2009), the latter of which can nowadays often be spent on social media.

The young are often at the forefront of emerging Internet usage practices but at the same time "young people are assumed to be far too naïve to handle themselves in public without careful supervision and control" (Maranto & Barton, 2010), the same assumption goes for SNS. But what adults regard as risks and reprehensible behavior, the young may see as opportunities (Kalmus & Ólafsson, 2013) and as an accepted shift in social norms (Shih, 2011).

In order to explore teacher's attitudes, perceptions and experiences with their students content creation practices on Facebook focus group interviews with Estonian high-school teachers ( $n= 21$ ) were carried out in spring 2013. Similar focus-group interviews were carried out with students ( $N= 16$ ) to study their perceptions and experiences with the content teachers' publish, share and like on Facebook.

Findings suggest that mutual surveillance has become a new norm amongst teachers and students. In other words, teachers and students have become each other's "nightmare readers" on Facebook (Marwick & boyd 2010). Teachers are

especially active in monitoring their students' profiles and in case of noticing posts that they believe to break the tacit rules of what is acceptable social media behaviour (too revealing visuals; swearing; bullying) they are ready to take an active role in mediating students' Facebook use. In many occasions teachers of the study expressed the need to educate their students about possible risks associated with social media, taking on the expected role of teachers as mentors (Miller, 2011; Lumpkin, 2008). Although teachers' aim was clearly to prevent harm and so to say to "save the students from themselves", both their opinions and experiences revealed that they rarely had any ethical or moral dilemmas about their practices. Too often, teachers interpret online privacy rather black-and-white, disregarding the subtle nuances of contemporary online privacy.

At the same time, focus groups with students reveal that teachers' own Facebook self-presentation and information sharing practices are often considered equally inappropriate by the students. In short, both teachers and students experience a clash between the expected behaviour that is considered suitable for a "proper teacher" or a "proper student" and the actual content creation practices taking place on Facebook. Furthermore, although teachers are very eager to condemn students' self-presentation and information sharing on Facebook and refer to it as "a clash between generations", they never seem to find fault in their own choices or digital literacies competence.

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