

Commenting on Pictures:

Teens Negotiating Gender and Sexualities on Social Networking Sites

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This inquiry shows how youths negotiate sexualities and gender when commenting on profile pictures on a social networking site. Attention is given to (1) how discourses are constituted within heteronormativity, and (2) how the mediated nature of the SNS contributes to resistance. Using insights from cultural media studies, social theory and queer criticism, representations in SNSs are viewed as sites of struggle. A textual analysis is used to show how commenting on a picture is a gendered practice, continuously cohering between the biological sex, performative gender and demanded desire. Although significant resignifications are found, they are often accompanied by a recuperation of heteronormativity. Therefore, this inquiry argues for continued attention to current contradictions in (self-) representations.

Introduction

I love all the stars in the sky, but they are nothing compared to the ones in your eyes,

My World ;\$ (l)

(XNieZnn)

XNieZnn, a 17 year old boy, chooses to proclaim his love for his girlfriend in the semi-public space of the social networking site (SNS) Netlog. For young media users, Netlog is a popular space to

“hang out” (Ito et al., 2010). Closely intertwined with the everyday lives of teenagers, this social website is constituted by the participations of its many users. At the same time, the material conditions of the website actively constitute youth cultures and their everyday life practices. The software of SNSs organizes people into connected networks and makes a considerable part of their social interactions semi-public, the medium takes part in the creation of new youthful subjectivities (McRobbie, 1994; Hall and Jefferson, 2006). But how do gendered sexualities thrive in these networked publics? In this essay we will inquire how young people negotiate sexualities and gendered practices when commenting on popular profile pictures. We will determine to what extent discourses on gender and sexualities are constituted within a heteronormative framework, and we will come to understand how contemporary youth represents a doubtful proof to be open for diverse gender behaviors and sexual identities.

Profile pictures are important communication tools in SNSs, often visually representing an identity in cyberspace (Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011). Focusing on text comments about profile pictures allows us to understand public networking as a *practice*, producing, reproducing and consuming meanings (Wittel, 2001; Castells, 2010). The representational activity of posting pictures on one’s profile creates content and *contexts* that negotiate sexualities and gender practices. Despite the increasing popularity of participatory media such as SNSs, particularly among young people, cyber-sexualities have not been taken seriously. Contributions questioning power and difference in popular and mainstream environments such as Facebook, MySpace and Netlog are scarce. In particular, sexuality in relation to cultural intelligibility and normativity has largely been ignored (Van Doorn, 2009).

This paper will take the current late modern antinomies surrounding gender and sexualities in media culture as central point of inquiry. Therefore, we will rely on the perspectives of cultural media studies, which has always approached media productions and representations as sites of political, social and cultural struggle (Kellner, 1995; Fiske, 2010). Jackson and Scott (2004) understand the ambiguity within the productions and representations of sexuality as significant changes that each time throw up new contradictions. Subject positions towards gender and sexuality are seen as more reflexive than ever (Johansson, 2007; Rahman and Jackson, 2010), “choosing” their own post-

traditional lifestyles. However, despite this reflexivity and the acknowledged transformations of intimacy (Giddens, 1992), identities are created within a bounded system, producing prescribed transcripts of *how to* produce, reproduce and consume gender and sexuality. Particularly in relation to media, Gill (2007; 2008) demands attention for the current contradictions in representations, exposing its complexities and the oscillations between empowerment, inclusiveness and a recuperated sexual subjectivation and exclusiveness (Ross, 2012). Therefore, to expose these ambiguities, we take up a critical investigation about what organizes gender and sexualities in everyday mediated life worlds, focusing on heterosexuality as the current dominant border in Western culture (Yep, 2003; Ward and Schneider, 2009; Johnson, 2005; Katz, 2007; Ingraham, 2005; Warner, 1991; Warner, 1999; Jackson, 2005). Constantly reiterated and proliferated in interactions and representations, heteronormativity is the current way of life. This normative project is unquestioned and considered necessary in order for one to be viewed as a legitimate member of society. We do not distinguish social institutions from the concept of heteronormativity; we understand them as fully incorporated within and interrelated with practices and identities.

Since social networks are highly participatory media, it might be argued that they lead to greater inclusivity and thus function democratically to renegotiate heteronormativity. Taking our point of departure from queer analysis (Butler, 1990; Chambers, 2007) we have conducted a qualitative textual analysis (McKee, 2003; Silverman, 2010) of picture comments made on social networking sites. Informed by the praxis of deconstruction (Derrida, 1997), we have exposed how gender and sexuality are repetitively constructed. Further, we discuss salient resignifications of these performative repetitions. Performative repetitions do not refer to a “natural” original; rather, they continuously construct their own reality.

Since networked publics immerse today’s teenagers in an ongoing flux of representations, demanding a daily public interaction with intelligible genders and sexualities, new media spheres provide a relevant point from which to expose power discourses in youth culture. Because of the public nature of sexual stories on SNSs, an intimate citizenship that rebukes exclusion and normativity and that acknowledges the “crucial role of pluralism and conflict” (Plummer, 2003: xi) has become more important than ever in the politics of everyday life in cyberspace.

This article elaborates on sexualities in networked publics and presents a theory about negotiating and renegotiating gendered sexualities. After the methodology, we offer some results and discussion followed by a few relevant conclusions.

Sexualities in networked publics

“Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye. You also cannot easily avoid them. They have become an almost natural feature of the social landscape, like pavement.”

(Warner, 2005: 7)

SNSs are relatively new public spaces. Among a young public, they are also popular spaces. 77 percent of European 13-16 year olds have a profile on one or more social media websites (Livingstone et al., 2011). Young people use social media platforms to tell stories about their relationships (Sveningsson Elm, 2007; Ito et al., 2010). Many of these stories concern friendships, but intimate relationships, that we understand as, “all erotically significant aspects of social life” (Jackson, 2006: 106), are also widely represented and discussed. Mediated spaces transform – for better or for worse – gender and sexual stories in youth cultures. Principally, we argue for SNSs that are open and diverse, acknowledging their public and networked potential to create inclusive representations and negotiations. Although this may not appear self-evident due to the presence of more than “one single type of media-based logic”. The variety of media practices in these online spaces creates a non-linear process in how media transform the social (Couldry, 2008). Although, networked publics have the potential to support an intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 1998; 2010) that transgresses normative gender and sexual identities, the medium must be thought of as a catalyst within wider social and cultural contexts.

According to boyd’s definition (2011; 2007), SNSs are a genre of networked publics. Composed of networked technologies that create a public space “that emerges as the result of the intersection of people, technology and practice,” SNSs are primarily about connecting and sharing. Networked publics contain digital stories (Lundby, 2008) and most have a friend list, functions for public commenting and stream-based updates. Digital stories engage with “a set of semiotic practices”

that includes texts, photos, music and videos, remixed and reorganized from existing media practices (Drotner, 2008: 63). This mediated storytelling makes it evident that different media logics, such as software architecture, help shape the stories told and ultimately shape the representations themselves.

Mediated publics existed long before the onset of SNSs; media such as print and television have not only reconstituted but also redefined the boundaries between public and private (Thompson, 1995). A fundamental characteristic of public spaces is that they are opposed to private spaces. For this reason, research in the field of youth and SNSs often deals with potential risks inherent in the increasingly public character of teenage social life and correspondent transformations of privacy (Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone and Brake, 2010; boyd, 2007; boyd and Heer, 2006; boyd, 2006; Jones et al., 2008). Public spaces create their own discourses by which they are shaped in turn (Warner, 2005). Today, public spheres, in SNSs and elsewhere, must be thought of as overlapping places where negotiations occur, rather than as homogeneous entities. In an environment where ongoing interactions are taking place, comments on profile pictures can be thought of as coexisting public spheres that interconnect the personal with the political. Such public discourses about the personal and intimate life are opposed to the private status that has always been given to intimacy and sexuality (Plummer, 2003; Warner, 2005). However, despite the risk this public display involves, “it can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived” (Warner, 2005: 57). Indeed, it could support what Plummer (2003) has called “the intimate citizenship project.” Networked publics could change the way youth cultures experience and act on intimacies, gender and sexuality.

Nevertheless, to fully understand gendered sexualities in networked publics, one must also consider not only the public character of these publics, but also the specific networked nature of negotiations that take place in SNSs. Rather than focusing solely on the networked nature of SNSs, this evolution in technology, communications and information needs to be positioned within what sociological thinkers have come to understand as the “network society” (Castells, 2010) or “network sociality” (Wittel, 2001). Closely related to late capitalism, network sociality is intertwined with late modern traits, such as individualization, ephemeral but intense contacts, commoditized social relations, and a focus on exchange of information rather than stories. Social bonds are continuously

produced, reproduced and consumed (Wittel, 2001). These late modern characteristics are increasingly associated with the SNS (Baym, 2010), whereby the medium is seen to facilitate an online stage for the “the networked self” to develop (Papacharissi, 2011). Although SNSs profiles are self-organized and self-centered, they do not escape power structures. This is due to their underlying architecture. Barabási (2011) describes how the number of friends in SNSs follows a “power law distribution,” where only a few individuals have a lot of friends, while most members of the network have a smaller but similar number of friends. These popular “power hubs” resemble the thoroughfares of a big city; they have high social capital and a great deal of influence in the network.

While there have been many studies relating to gender, sexuality and the Internet (cf. *infra*), topics such as power and difference and gender and sexuality have hardly been discussed in SNSs. Researchers have largely neglected the question of how sexualities and gender practices thrive in networked publics (Van Doorn 2009). Some notable exceptions are Mainsah’s contribution on ethnic minority self-representation (Mainsah, 2011), Cover’s work on romantic coupledom (Cover, 2010), discussions of gender and/or sexuality (Van Doorn, 2009; Cooper and Dzara, 2010), and discussions of femininities and masculinities (Gómez, 2011; Siibak, 2010). Nevertheless, as Van Doorn rightly points out, studies in digital culture or cybercultural studies and more specifically cyberfeminist (Plant, 1995; O’Brien, 1999; White, 2006) cyberqueer (Wakeford, 1997; O’Riordan and Phillips, 2007; Alexander, 2002) and digital race studies (Nakamura, 2002; 2008) are part of a broad tradition of critical investigations.¹ Literature has been published about LGBT identity issues and online new media (Pullen and Cooper, 2010; Mowlabocus, 2010); these studies proved to be valuable contributions to our understanding of specific opportunities and threats that LGBTs face in various online environments, such as online communities, Facebook and the popular dating site, Gaydar.

Research on cyberqueer spaces is valuable, as it deals with rival publics that offer resistance to heteronormativity. Nevertheless, an intimate citizenship demands a plurality of voices in all public spheres other than the “truly, truly subversive public cultures” (Plummer, 2003: 71). Cyberqueer spaces are counterpublics. Therefore, they have a dialectical relationship to the general public, redefining “them” and “us” (Coleman and Ross, 2010). They implicitly honor intelligible identities as “pure citizenship” (Warner, 2005). It should be emphasized that young people need popular and

mainstream online spaces such as Facebook, MySpace and Netlog to be open for a late modern world. That means these spaces must support an intimate citizenship that transgresses heteronormativity.

With the emergence of SNSs, sexualities have been introduced to networked publics. Intimate stories are now increasingly digital, potentially told in these public spaces (Couldry, 2008). They link the intimate and sexual life with the political, and thereby change the way youth cultures do intimacies, gender and sexuality. Further, these new cultures of intimacy are ideal places for change, pluralism and conflict, and reintroduce the importance of an 'intimate citizenship'; which we understand as 'ending social exclusion and ensuring social inclusion' (Weeks, 2010: 125). The recognition of the political significance of digital spaces and the call for inclusion draws the attention to the democratic project media studies envisions (Kellner, 1995; De Ridder et al., 2011). Participatory media culture demands a stronger connection with queer pedagogy (Halberstam, 2003; Rasmussen, 2006). All too often digital literacy is linked to technical skills, while young people should be trained as late modern ambassadors of intimacy, playing this out in networked publics, sharing openness and plurality, criticizing racism, sexism and homophobia. Nevertheless, productions and representations in current media culture are characterized by contradiction (Gill, 2007; 2008), next part will introduce how this ambiguity emerges. Moreover, it will elaborate on how the organization of gender and sexuality is strictly heteronormative, but also how new possibilities for resistance are open.

Locating and dislocating subjects

How can young media users renegotiate heteronormativity in the online spaces of SNSs? Since these social websites are participatory media where the users produce a lot of the representations, it is necessary to focus on self-representations of gender and sexuality in order to answer this question. For this reason, we need a definition of the social "self" and an understanding of what it means to resist heteronormativity (Jackson, 2006). A redefining of these subject positions happens when discourses are displaced and again inscribed into the flows where cultural meaning is produced. Social change occurs when new meanings are adopted in social interaction, creating spaces

for non-normative identities to develop and thrive. We define this process as locating and dislocating subjects.

Social media research often discusses social selves in a way that is problematic. Emphasis on self-representation neglects certain tensions and complexities; in particular, it takes a pre-discursive agency for granted. Because the self is not an “isolated entity, but one that operates at the intersection of general truths and shared principles,” it is more valuable to use the word “subject” rather than “self.” As Mansfield (2000: 3) notes, “one is always to be subject *to* or *of* something [emphasis in original]”. Although the subject is seen as more reflexive than ever, choosing its own post-traditional lifestyles, essentialist notions of gender and sexuality are still the norm. Rahman and Jackson (2010: 149) understand this essentialism as a continuation of “‘modern’ biological and psychological essentialism [that] is still the base-line cultural explanation for both gender and sexual behaviour.” Research on youth cultures, gender practices and sexualities constantly conflict with oppositions, such as liberation and morals, equity and repression (Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Johansson, 2007). Negotiations of gender and sexual identities in networked publics involve complex social interactions within contemporary culture, and they need to be understood as social and cultural struggles.

Gender practices and sexualities in western society are subject to heteronormative identities, practices and institutions, excluding identities and creating boundaries in society. For this reason, the intimate citizenship project of networked publics seems overly optimistic. At the same time, there is a transformed intimacy (Giddens, 1992), precisely because heteronormativity is continuously being resisted and eroded in everyday life. Certainly, popular media environments have the power to deconstruct, creating counterhegemonic representations of intimacies and thereby gradually eroding heteronormativity (Best, 1998; Fiske, 2010; Kellner, 1995). Queer analysis is particularly valuable in showing not only how deconstruction takes place in everyday interactions, but also how it could lead to non-normative identities. Queer politics is particularly interested in exposing binary oppositions to which gender and sexuality are regulated, and in showing how regulatory signs are placed upon the body.

Developing a theory based on queer politics helps to show how normativity is produced and at the same time resisted. Further, it could help to understand how the mediated nature of the SNS could

contribute to an open online public sphere. We use Butler's understanding of subversive politics (1990) as the basis for our definition of *locating* and *dislocating* subjects. The notion of subversion elaborated in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) can be seen as a political response to norms, where the agency of the subject appears from *inside* the system itself. Butler did not use the term heteronormativity. However, she did use the corresponding term "heterosexual matrix," by which she meant the assembly of norms that produce subjects whose sex/gender/desires and practices cohere (Chambers, 2007). As a first and important discussion of feminism and subversion, Butler (1990) seeks to locate areas where norms need to be challenged. The concept of reiteration is central to her argument. Normative gender and sexual identities are produced by means of reiteration, and it can be resisted by exposing repetitive practices. As Chambers (2007) puts it, exposing heteronormativity is about "undermining norms" and "calling them into question" by means of "revealing their conditions as norms." Dislocating normativity is nothing other than exposing repetition. Since subversion is an "incalculable effect" that is strongly dependent on context, it is impossible to define which practices are subversive or non-heteronormative.

When considering how contemporary youths negotiate gender practices and sexualities while commenting on popular pictures in a SNS, the tensions between self, reflexivity and subjectivity need to be taken in account. The democratic intimate citizenship project can be seen in struggles, more specifically, in the dialectical synthesis between locating and dislocating gender and sexuality in online cultural productions and mediated representations. Current media culture is characterized by continuous dislocations that move beyond the normative. However, at the same time these dislocations are not to be seen separate from continuous reverts to classical sexual and gender script played out in popular media productions and representations (Ross, 2012). Precisely the contradiction between location and dislocation is what we will play out in discussing current youthful productions in the popular SNSs Netlog.

Method

As part of our research projectⁱⁱ, we created a profile on Netlog, a popular SNS for Flemish youth living in northern Belgium (Jeugddienst and Jeugdwerknet, 2010). We contacted schools and youth movements and recruited Flemish teenagers between 13 and 18 years of age to friend our profile. When the participants were asked to join, it was made clear that their profiles were going to be used for academic research. In doing so, we tried to obtain informed consent from the participantsⁱⁱⁱ. In this way, we were able to incorporate profiles in our research that would otherwise be unavailable to us because of privacy settings. Therefore, some of the profiles we used are semi-public spaces, only allowing friends to look at the pictures and comments.^{iv}

Research into online identities has some specific challenges, creating an added complexity of the online versus the offline identity, the “real” versus the “virtual”. However, “online” identities do not reconfigure new subjectivities. Kennedy (2008: 861) therefore offers to go “*beyond* online Identities” [emphasis in original] and to look at offline contexts of online selves. Following Kendall (1999: 58), who argues that, “On-line interaction cannot be divorced from the off-line social and political contexts within participants live their daily lives”; this inquiry understands the observed online negotiations as augmentations of the everyday.

Research sample

Owned by Massive Media and based in Belgium,^v Netlog is a mainstream SNS that markets itself as an “online platform where users can keep in touch with and extend their social network” (Netlog, n.d.). On Netlog, people have the ability to create personal profiles that connect them with the larger network by indicating people as “friends.” Profiles include media that can be customized and personalized. These features are personal self-representation tools (pictures with rating functions, videos, a blog, self-introductory texts, general profile layout, personal events calendar, etc.), as well as tools for interpersonal communication (sending personal messages) and communication with the larger connected network (comments on pictures and videos, the guestbook, etc.).

Although there was a wide range of data available to us, we chose to analyze comments on the most popular profile pictures. We chose to proceed in this manner for several reasons. First of all, comments on popular pictures turned out to be the most active (semi-)public spaces where intimate

stories were being told. Furthermore, by choosing the most popular profiles within our sample, we were sure to incorporate active publics that had a lot of intersections with other users. When we extracted the data in October 2011, our profile was connected with 159 users. From among these, we chose the 10 profiles that had the greatest number of visitors, and from each of these we selected the picture that generated the largest number of comments. In this way, we had a total research sample of 10 profile pictures and 812 comments, which we copied and saved in orderly documents.

**(INSERT TABLE 1: DETAILS OF THE POPULAR PROFILES, PICTURES AND
COMMENTS WITHIN THE NETWORK)**

Data-analysis

The analysis provided here is not exhaustive for the collected data. Rather, it is illustrative of the elaborated theories. Qualitative textual analysis has been used to analyze the comments. The text was seen as an expression of a multiplicity of voices, which we exposed through the processes of (1) locating and (2) dislocating. Informed by queer criticism (Chambers, 2007; Butler, 1990), we have made sense of discourses that deal with gender practices and sexualities (McKee, 2003; Silverman, 2010). We studied how the textual productions of picture comments are reflections of discursive knowledge on intimate or erotic aspects of social life. In this first step of our analysis, we attempted to locate where norms could be challenged. Further, this textual analysis shows through a deconstructive reading (Derrida, 1997) how the ideology of heteronormativity also fails. More Specifically, how this failing represents counterhegemony (Fiske, 2010; Kellner, 1995; Best, 1998). This second step is how we came to understand the project of dislocating. Although we focused particularly on the text, the pictures, which are often accompanied by a small introductory text by the producer, are important contexts that we also took into account.

Commenting on pictures as a gendered practice

Commenting on pictures in the public space of a SNS is not a neutral practice. There are specific dynamics and practices correlated to the mediated nature of public networks. As Mainsah (2011) concluded when looking into self-representations of ethnic minority youth in a SNS, the use of

language is often hybrid, people mix social languages when interacting and producing text online. Looking at our data, it can be observed that in this particular Flemish youth culture, the Dutch language was often mixed with English words and expressions. Moreover, Dutch words and syntax were often modified, resulting in a more phonetic use of language.^{vi} Collective and interpersonal dynamics resulted in structural patterns that influenced how individuals reacted to compliments; this was especially the case when reacting to pictures that portrayed intimate relationships. These complex semiotic structures need constant interpretative work when one wants to belong to this youth culture and to actively comment in the Netlog context. The appropriate use of communication patterns creates an insider status and implicit power structures that support the creation of a shared group identity. The network also perpetuates communication rules and practices that already exist in youth culture (Mainsah, 2011: 198). According to Baym (2010), it is more difficult to build a solid group identity in an SNS than in an online community, because the personal profile centers focus on the subject, rather than on the group. Baym (2010: 91) uses the term “networked collectivism” to describe how certain group identifications may arise in networked publics. Based on our observations, we determined that a networked collectivism with specific communication rules and practices had emerged. The age and geographical identification of group members were the primary factors affecting these rules and practices. The mediation of identifications associated with a specific youth culture not only perpetuates communication rules and practices of everyday life among the Flemish teenagers, but also continuously reinforces them.

Table 1 presents an overview of the specific cases used in this research. We have included some basic information collected from user profiles, including gender and number of visitors. The numbers of visitors is somewhat high for the Netlog context; hence, these profiles are popular power hubs, interconnected with a very large number of “friends” in the network. The number of comments recorded demonstrates the often large number of interactions occurring in these publics. As the table shows quite clearly, boys do not tend to comment as much, while girls are very active in commenting. Therefore, commenting can be understood as a gendered practice, whereas comments refer to implicit rules stemming from the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). When commenting, coherence between the biological sex, the performative gender and the expected desire is necessary (Chambers, 2007).


Girls predominantly react to the pictures of boys, and boys only comment on pictures of girls. Girls were not as strict as boys in fitting within this structure, resulting in a very binary opposition where boys always concord and girls step out to engage in “girl talk” (cfr. infra).

This general tendency is most clearly observed in comments on pictures that centered the subject, showing and reconstructing the physical body at its best. Young people strictly control the performances on these pictures by using mirrors or self-timer functions on their cameras. This practice can be understood as active management designed to create a desired identity in the online environment. Pictures that did not center a subject, such as those found on the profiles of Sinback and XNieZnn, showed intimate relationships between a boy and a girl. Representations of intimate relationships are encouraged in comments. Both boys and girls commented on these pictures.

Excessive girlhood

Again referring to the table, it is clear that girls are dominant when it comes to commenting on profile pictures. Furthermore, it seems that girls not only engaged in commenting, but also actively managed the popularity of the pictures in our sample. This positive “girl talk” engaged in mostly giving compliments, connecting the respondent with the person in the picture in a friendly and/or loving way. The comments girls post are usually very short and could be seen as social grooming that forges, affirms and displays bonds, rather than as functional communication (Tufekci, 2008) This strong and active management by the girls could be understood as an active dislocating of passive femininity. We contend that the role of the SNS as a mediated environment is important here. As Kearney (2006) argued, in current girl culture, large varieties of media are produced. Also, in digital culture and SNSs, girls seem to be active producers of texts that circulate beyond their bedrooms that were “long understood as the primary location for girls’ creative endeavors” (Kearney, 2006: 3).

When girls comment on pictures from other girls, as in the photos of Youaretheone and _Kiwi, they are primarily concerned with propagating strong friendships between themselves and the girl in the picture.

I love her soooooo muuuuuuch! 

(Girl, 14 y.o.)

I love you sooooooooooooo!

(Girl, 16 y.o.)

By their reactions to pictures of boys, girls also managed the popularity of these pictures. This resulted in a power shift where representations of masculine bodies became the objects of viewing by women (Rahman, 2011). With redundant comments such as *Hot Stuff!*, girls produced and reproduced desirable representations of masculine bodies. In this regard, the SNS and the comments act as an online stage that centers empowered femininities.

However, our findings correspond to those of Nayak and Kehily (2008: 184), who note that “girl-talk continues to be peppered by a liberal sprinkling of hetero-romance and perhaps a stronger sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure and satisfaction than ever before.” Indeed, in shaping this ultimate project of the late modern subject, girls often dissolve into caricatured hyperboles, tumbling-down in sheer admiration and yearning for the attention of a boy when posting a comment. The following are examples of comments on the photo of kendeman.

You are fucking beautiful!

(Girl, 16 y.o.)

Heeey! Ken is a sick, wonderful crazy love!

I just wanted to say this because I think you are wonderfuuuuuull! Nobody can compete with you, I'm your biggest fan

(Girl, 14 y.o.)

This excessive form of hyper-femininity is reinforced by the mediated nature of the SNS. Moreover, reiteration and communication rules work together as catalysts and partly determine the performances of excessive femininities (cfr. infra).

As hyper-femininity can be read as bringing the invisible labour of “doing gender” into public view (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 184), it clearly shows that in contemporary mediated youth culture femininity is truly performative. While in the SNS passive femininity is dislocated and thus empowered, a highly romanticized heterosexuality is still continuously brought to the front. Moreover, this oscillating between empowerment/sexual subjectivity is what characterizes current media culture in general. Despite the girls’ voices are heard in these networked publics, the former imposed objectification is now internalized as a self-chosen performance (Gill, 2007; 2008).

Negotiating hegemonic borders

The fact that comments from boys are relative lacking in our sample may be explained by the fact that girls are active producers in digital culture (Kearney, 2006). On the picture of _Kiwi, however, more boys reacted than girls. The picture, representing a girl in a rather erotic pose, is the only one in this sample that evoked comments almost exclusively from boys. However, unlike numerous comments that girls made about pictures of boys, the reactions to this picture did not reduce the depicted girl to an object of looking. Comments were loving and timid rather than sexual.

Some examples were found of boys resisting and thus dislocating what could be termed as hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005). The earlier assertion that comments are gendered and boys only react to the pictures of girls was scarcely disrupted. The following example is a short conversation that unfolded amidst other comments. The comment, started by a boy who reacted to the picture of Sandroishere, resulted in the following small talk.

Bro! Xxx

(Boy, 16 y.o.)

Big love between us!

(Sandroishere)

How is Aster doing?

(Boy, 16 y.o.)

This representation of a loving friendship and display of affection between two boys in this public environment, shows how the emotional conflict within hegemonic masculinity is renegotiated. As emotions are often associated with feminine, gay and thus subordinate masculinities (Connell, 2005), this practice might be taken as an illustration of how gendered behaviors are expanding for boys in contemporary youth culture. McCormack and Anderson understand such an inclusive masculinity as a sign of a “zeitgeist” where homophobia is no longer “the most important tool for policing masculinities” (McCormack and Anderson, 2010: 846).

However, again, we notice a duality in this representation.. By posing the question *How is Aster doing*,^{vii} the represented sexual subject is immediately reinscribed within the clear heterosexual borders demanded by the matrix. This example shows how within inclusive masculinities heterosexuality is recuperated, thereby establishing and maintaining a normative sexual identity (McCormack and Anderson, 2010).

Another illustration of how hegemonic masculinity and cohering gender practices for young masculinities are negotiated is found in a short introductory text on the picture of Z_Raauw.

Fótóshót @ Turkey ^^

I think I look rather gay on this picture, but it is still a nice picture xD (I think)

(Z_Raauw)

The photo shows a wet-haired young boy on a tropical beach, stripped to the waist and looking into the lens while gently smiling. This picture was commented on extensively. The introductory text declared that the producer had certain reservations about representing himself this way. The accompanied text and picture demonstrate that performative masculinity is an ideological project, continuously under construction, and that there is a possibility of doing it incorrectly. The struggle over this performance is a clear negotiation between a mediated subject that wants to look his best and the normative constraints of having a heterosexual identity that regulates depictions of the body. The comments on this photo and text relied on two different strategies. They countered the stereotype that a beautiful man is automatically gay, and they took heterosexuality as the norm.

not gay! Just veeeryyy niice! 😊

(Girl, 16 y.o.)

Whahahahh,, no dear Kane we know (I think) all that you are not gay

(Girl, 17 y.o.)

Some comments were more troubling, referring to the possible loss of hegemonic masculine status.

I think too that you look a little gay on this picture...

(Girl, 20 y.o.)

Indeed gay, but yeah, what can you do about it eh XP

(Boy, 20 y.o.)

The label “gay” is not automatically an identity for homosexual boys, as Pascoe argues (2010: 323); this abject identity (Butler, 1993) rather constitutes and regulates masculinity in society. In these particular mediated representations, commenting could be seen as a regulatory practice, surveying heteronormativity. This supports the argument that commenting is a gendered practice. Besides regulating the subject when interacting and placing comments, commenting also actively surveys and interpellates others.

Although we found examples that suggest gendered behaviors are expanding for boys, even in a public environment, hegemonic masculinity is not completely dislocated. Furthermore, different strategies were used in the textual and visual representations to recuperate heterosexuality when negotiating an inclusive masculinity (McCormack and Anderson, 2010). The gendered practice of commenting is a reciprocal action, not only regulating the comments of the subject, but also actively surveying and interpellating others.

The perfect couple

As we already mentioned, the pictures of Sinback and XNieZnn do not center the subjects. Both show an intimate relation between a boy and a girl, represented through the act of kissing on the lips and hugging. This public performance of an intimate relationship does not end with the picture. In each of the cases, the picture initiates an intimate but public conversation between the couple. In these conversations, the female member of the couple is very active in spreading her “everlasting” engagement through extensive declarations of love. The boy, who in our sample was always the one who posted the picture in public, posts brief confirmations of his love for the girl. When we located the discourses in these comments, the following themes emerged:

- The relationship will be *forever*.
- The relationship is *everything*, nothing of importance exists outside of it.
- The *one* exists, and he is mine.
- *She* is *his*, and *she* is nothing without *him*.
- Being *faithful* is the most important value.
- The girl expresses a strong desire to get *married*.

This mediated representation of an intimate relationship shows how the gendered practice of commenting operates from within a heteronormative perspective. Predominantly, these comments seem to illustrate that “institutionalized heterosexuality provides a sense of well-being” (Cokely, 2005: 180). Repeated overstatements refer to ideas intertwined with the “wedding industrial complex” exploited in popular culture and media and with religion and state institutions (Ingraham, 2008). Side by side with the public dialogue between the couple, other comments iteratively encourage the relationship, thereby *reproducing* the importance of institutionalized heterosexuality and the coupledness/promiscuity binary (Cover, 2010). Most commenters emphasized the couple should *keep/keep’n/keep!* their relationship, while others expressed their jealousy.

Mediated romantic coupledness can be understood as a theatrical performance that goes beyond representing it visually in a picture. Textually producing and reproducing institutionalized

heterosexuality as the *summum bonum* shows how the gendered practice of commenting on pictures is closely intertwined with heterosexuality (Ingraham, 1995).

Commenting in networked publics

The mediated nature of these public spaces has a complex role in how it contributes to a possible cultural resistance that transgresses heteronormative identities, practices and institutions. Generally, commenting on a picture is a gendered practice that demands coherence to the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; Chambers, 2007). As mentioned earlier, the mediated nature of the SNS strengthens representations of coherence, but it also creates a stage for occasional counterhegemony, or dislocations of passive femininity and hegemonic masculinity. This struggle reflects the complexity of how a queer political project can thrive in a SNS. There are two media logics for how networked publics transform social negotiations of gender and sexuality. The first is the repeated public display of gender and sexuality, while the second involves the iterative logic of mediated communication.

The redundant public display of gender and sexuality is valuable, since it creates ongoing and semi-public negotiations. In particular, pictures that represent bodies and that center the self or intimate relations create contexts that implicitly communicate and elaborate on gender and sexual norms. While the pictures create such contexts, comments about these pictures create contexts that interpret both pictures and other comments. This ongoing flux of communication exposes the iterative logic of mediated communication. Iterative logic is observed in the very nature of the software design that enables these representations, as well as in the communication practices of the young people themselves. Commenters did not engage in meaningful communication; they reiterated and copied each other. This is how the hyperbolic comments often associated with hyper-femininity were constructed. In reactions to a picture, the comment *Beautiful!* was repeated endlessly, resulting in comments such as *Fucking beautiful!*, *Ridiculously beautiful!*, etc.

Different practices and dynamics worked together to transform comments on pictures to real public spheres that implicitly negotiated gender and sexual norms. The public display of these negotiations and the iterative logic of mediated networked publics contributes to hegemonic and counterhegemonic productions of heteronormativity.

Conclusions

As we tried to make sense of how youths negotiate gender and sexualities when commenting on popular profile pictures, we argued for an understanding of the struggles of the late modern subject (Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Rahman and Jackson, 2010; Johansson, 2007). Supported by media and communication technologies, today's youth cultures are immersed in an ongoing flux of producing, reproducing and consuming meanings. An SNS can be seen as the ultimate mediation of the network society, a complex platform for social change. While viewing networked publics as contexts for negotiations of gender and sexuality, this study emphasized the importance of queer criticisms, since the intersections of power/difference and gender/sexuality are largely ignored in the expanding field of research about SNSs. In exposing the locations and dislocations of heteronormative identities, practices and institutions in texts that commented on popular pictures, we showed how gender and sexuality could be culturally resisted.

We came to understand commenting on pictures as a gendered practice, meaning that in order to be intelligible, comments needed to cohere between the biological sex, the performative gender and the expected desire (Butler, 1990; Chambers, 2007). This gendered practice is strongly intertwined with a continuous representation of heterosexuality. Therefore, we argue that the representation of heterosexuality can be understood as the – although not always intended – ultimate *purpose* when commenting on a picture (Ingraham, 1995).

We also noticed significant dislocations. Passive femininity was abandoned because of girls' high degree of communicative activity (Kearney, 2006). We noticed a power shift where masculine bodies repeatedly became objects of looking (Rahman, 2011). Further, in representing strong and loving friendships between boys, gendered behaviors disrupted traditional masculine hegemony (Connell, 2005; McCormack and Anderson, 2010). Notwithstanding this observed reflexivity, we remain critical of these dislocations, as the “empowered femininities” often dissolved into a self-chosen, internalized objectification (Gill, 2007; 2008), and boys carefully recuperated their heterosexual representations so as not to tumble-down to an abject “gay” identity (Butler, 1993; Pascoe, 2007). In our view, the gendered practice of commenting on pictures is reciprocal, both

constituting the subject and others within the borders of intelligible genders and sexualities. Thereby, this research shows that, dislocations of heteronormative representations in youths cultural productions must be understood in relation to continuous recuperations that bring along new tensions and contradictions (Jackson and Scott, 2004). Commenting on profile pictures resembles the complexity of current media representations of gender and sexuality (Gill 2007; Ross, 2012). These findings show how the celebration of reflexivity in relation to participatory media must be rethought. Self-representations need careful management within prescribed transcripts to be intelligible, moreover, networked structures are surveillable places, which makes it not self-evident for non-normative gender and sexual identities to thrive online (Sender, 2012).

The mediated and networked nature of these public spaces entailed some specific practices and dynamics, revealing a sophisticated relation to democracy and social change (Couldry, 2008). The medium supported a cultural resistance to the extent that it made these dislocations public. Moreover, a SNS creates an important stage for negotiations of gender practices and sexualities in general.

Since the political relevance of negotiations on gender and sexualities in networked publics, there is still some work needed on social media. This paper defined this democratic project as a need for an intimate citizenship that rebukes exclusion and transgresses heteronormativity. A valuable project for further research would be looking beyond the textual, incorporating the redundant visual communication tools found in SNSs. Also, involving actual audiences and publics is an important next step.

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Notes

ⁱ The overview of critical inquiries on the intersections power/difference and gender/sexuality in cybercultural studies we present here is non-exhaustive. A more thorough overview can be found in the introductions of Bell (2001) and Nayar (2010). The collections of Trend (2001) and Bell and Kennedy (2001), offer introductory readings of key thinkers in the field.

ⁱⁱ This research is part of a 4 year project on youth, digital culture and heteronormativity, funded by the Special Research Fund (BOF) at Ghent University. The created research profile was followed during a long period (18 months), with different moments of data collection. Precisely because of his long-term follow up, we tried to limit the influence of participants modifying their online behaviour for the research. Notwithstanding these precautions, the impact of the informed consent could never be totally judged.

ⁱⁱⁱ Participants were told that this research from Ghent University was about online youth culture and that by adding the research profile as a 'friend', their profiles would be used for academic research. Further, we also added this information on our research profile, clearly stating that if anything of their online productions would be used, this would be strictly anonymous.

^{iv} Although semi-public, all profiles used in our analysis had a very large number of friends. The individuals who managed these popular profiles probably added and accepted friends constantly in order to become such popular intersections within the network. Because of this, these profiles had a large number of social interactions between people who did not actually knew each other.

^v Although Belgium based, Netlog's website claims that it is "currently available in 40 languages and has more than 94 million members throughout Europe, and this number increases every day." (Netlog, n.d.).

^{vi} In the examples used in this article, we consistently translated the comments to English. Due to this practical consideration, the aspect of "language play" is lost in the examples.

^{vii} Aster is the girlfriend of Sandroishere.

Table 1: Details of the popular profiles, pictures and comments within the network

Nickname	Gender	Age	Total visitors (not unique)	Number of comments on most popular profile pictures divided by gender			
				Male	Female	Author*	
				1	kendeman	Male	16
2	Sinback	Male	17	152.317	8	6	3
3	Z_Raauw	Male	18	142.303	8	240	2
4	XNieZnn	Male	17	78.658	15	72	14
5	Kurtpicture	Male	18	72.722	-	21	1
6	tuning.beats	Male	18	54.524	4	26	1
7	Youaretheone	Female	16	52.040	26	21	6
8	Sandroishere	Male	16	50.166	10	55	12
9	_Kiwi	Female	100**	47.399	28	2	13
10	Persianman	Male	18	46.396	9	8	-

* By “author” we mean the comments that are placed by the profile owner him or herself.

** This girl is 16 years old in real life, but on her SNS profile she filled in to be a 100 years old.