


# About Sex, Open-Mindedness, and Cinnamon Buns: Exploring Sexual Social Media

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## Abstract

General purpose social media platforms—often incited by American legislation—increasingly exclude sex from acceptable forms of sociality in the abstract name of user safety. This article analyzes interview data (four developer interviews and 56 user interviews) from three North European sexual platforms (Darkside, Alastonsuomi, and Libertine.Center) to explore what follows from including sexual sites in definitions and analyses of social media and, by extension, in including sex in definitions of “the social” itself. We found that instead of context collapse, the users and developers of the studied sites operate with what we call context promiscuity, blending boundaries, but maintaining their structural integrity. This allows for a particular silosociality to emerge based on experiences of safety, risk, and consent. 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. Rather than framing sexual social media exchanges in terms of their perceived risks and harms, we would do well to also inquire after the risks and harms involved in ousting sex from networked forms of sociality. Deplatforming of sex truncates our ways of understanding what interests, forces, and attachments drive our sociality. Yet, when analyzing social media as if the socio-sexual matters, platforms designed to support sexual displays and connections become vital nodal points in social media ecologies.

## Keywords

context promiscuity, deplatforming of sex, safety, silosociality, social media

## Introduction: Sex and Social Media

Online sociality certainly predates platforms such as MySpace and Facebook, yet it was only through their broad popular appeal that the term *social media* became commonly used. In interrogating how “the social” is reconfigured in social media, Nick Couldry and José van Dijck (2015) argue that these platforms have come to appropriate the social (cf. Mejias, 2013) so as to redefine not only how people are social online, but what it means to be social in the first place. They call for studying platforms “as if the social mattered” at a moment when social relatedness is increasingly reduced to computational connectivity in corporate infrastructures. In this article, and following this call, we attend to the versions of the social offered by sexual social media platforms and their users’ ways of engaging in networked sociality so as to register “the fractured spaces from where alternative proposals of ‘the social’ might be built” (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015, p. 2).

The sociality offered by mainstream social media economy privileges popularity and prosperous connectivity along with voluntary (and involuntary) modes of sharing user data. It is rooted in an ego-centric outlook anchored in user profiles and networks clustered around those, leading to imaginaries of social media as affording individualism—even antisociality—instead of connection and interest-based communication (Tiidenberg et al., 2021). This version of sociality also prescribes a strikingly normative model of the sexual that relegates it from networked publics to more hidden or private realms. For even as increasingly diverse options are

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available for users to identify their gender, social media platforms are not designed to prompt the presentation of sexual selves (see Bivens, 2017).

Globally leading social media services have, in fact, been observed to increasingly exclude sex from their acceptable forms of sociality in a horizontal vein and in the name of user safety, a trend described by scholars and activists as a “deplatforming of sex” (Blunt et al., 2021; Mollidrem, 2018; Tiidenberg, 2021). As scholars have previously argued, the removal of sexual ways of connecting from networked publics is particularly harmful to sexual and gender minorities for whom (often pseudonymous) forms of relating afford access to information, pleasure, and community (Byron, 2019; Duguay, 2018). Such effacement is harmful to sexual publics organized around particular practices and identities and, in delimiting self-expression, sociality, and knowledge, detrimental to sexual rights (Berlant & Warner, 1998; see also Dobson et al., 2018; Plummer, 2003; Spišák et al., 2021). In contrast, sexual platforms afford forms of relating where the (relative and controlled, rather than open) publicness of sex is not understood as inappropriate but rather as a mode of sociality (see McGlotten, 2013, p. 30). At the same time, only allowing sex on specialty sites tends to further marginalize it in ways that does not reflect people’s experiences of sociality.

This article explores three North European online platforms devoted to nudity, sex, and kink: the Swedish BDSM, fetish and kink platform Darkside, and the Estonian Libertine. Center used mainly by people interested in group sex and the Finnish Alastonsuomi used for a broad range of nude and sexual self-expression. We ask what follows from including such sites in definitions of social media and, by extension, from including sex in definitions of “the social” at play. What avenues do these platforms open up to understanding the role that sexuality plays in people’s networked routines, social bonds, and forms of relating? The three sexual 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.

Following a section on methods and contexts, our discussion is structured into four sections: First, we offer an analysis of these platforms as built infrastructures that shape and constrain sociality, with a particular focus on how they are built in the context of developer perceptions of the broader social media ecosystem. Second, we discuss how these built spaces are used and experienced as “socio-sexual silos” within the broader social media ecosystem. Third, we examine how further silos emerge on these platforms, with a particular focus on “silos of safety.” Finally, we consider what this means for social media sociality and discuss what we term “context promiscuity.”

While social media research has largely been invested in analyzing individual platforms, there is also a growing discussion on how users move between them in promiscuous

ways, giving shape to social media ecologies both complex and habitual (Payne, 2015; Phillips & Milner, 2021; Taffel, 2019). We operationalize user enactment and traversing of social media ecologies through the concept of “silo-sociality”—a “cultural dynamic,” where experiential and imagined social spaces emerge out of “people’s shared interests,” and are sustained “through shared practices, vernacular and sensibility” (Tiidenberg et al., 2021, p. 13). We discuss the users’ conflicting desires both to maintain boundaries between experiential and affective “silos” and to allow for things to travel across them. In doing so, we consider sexual expression as put in motion across platforms, user cultures, content policies, and sexual norms.

These cross-platform connections involve highly situational negotiations between pseudonymity and real-name policies, connecting such motion to varying degrees of opacity and visibility in the context of sexual expression and exchange (see also Light, 2014; Sundén, forthcoming a). In attending to cross-platform traffic and “silo-socialities” (Tiidenberg et al., 2021) enacted by the users of these three sites, we re-examine the notion of “context collapse” (Marwick & boyd, 2011) broadly used to conceptualize how generic social media disafford social boundary work. We highlight how strategic audience segregation meets leaky boundaries and how content and data bleeds occur in social media presence. Rather than furthering a context collapse, we understand such leakiness as “context promiscuity”—as a partially deliberate bleeding and blending of data and contexts.

## Methods and Contexts: In-Depth Interviews With Users and Developers of Sexual Platforms

This article builds on a 3-year collaborative project involving platform walk-throughs, ethnographic observation, and in-depth interviews with administrators and developers of two of the platforms ( $n=4$ ) and in-depth interviews with the users of all three ( $n=56$ ) conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2022. It primarily relies on analysis of the interview data, with the platform walkthrough data on rules, verification processes, and social features and the ethnographic observation notes on how those features are used in everyday life serving as contextualizing material. Approval from the ethics review boards of each of our respective institutions in Sweden, Finland, and Estonia was secured at the beginning of research. The handling of interview data was General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)-compliant and involved explicit informed consent from the participants who were recruited through a range of means: calls published on online forums connected to sexuality, through snowballing among participants and through participants themselves spreading information on the platforms studied.

Our participants are self-selected and their contributions to the research have, in many cases, been motivated by their active engagement with the sites in question, as well as by

the value they hold in their sexual and social lives. For the most part, these are not casual lurkers but invested users, some of whom have been site members for over a decade. Our interview participants used the most popular generic social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), dating apps (e.g., Tinder, Grindr), and other sexual social media platforms (e.g., Fetlife, SDC, Xperience United). Their sexual self-identifications included straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer and their kinks and relationship practices spanned BDSM, fetishism, swinging, ethical non-monogamy, exhibitionism, cross-dressing, and watersports. Most were cis-gendered (with one trans-man and some informants identifying as non-binary), White, and spoke Estonian, Finnish, or Swedish as their first language, with occasional foreigners living in the three countries also making the sample.

Online audio(visual) interviews, each from 1 to 2 hr in length, were conducted mostly via Zoom (participants were offered choice of platform), transcribed, and open-coded. For this article, we collated all interview snippets pertaining to sociality and affordances of the studied platforms, as well as any comparisons with other social media or sexual platforms. We then created analytic memos (Tracy, 2013), and after discussing these, collaboratively designed pattern codes (Saldana, 2009). After coding for patterns, we conducted cross-platform thematic analysis.

Our research is shaped by a context of contradiction. On one hand, the COVID pandemic intensified the prevalence of, and even governmental recommendations for networked forms of connecting, sexual socializing included. On the other hand, globally leading social media platforms, such as Meta's Instagram and Facebook or ByteDance's TikTok, have made extensive efforts to zone out sexual displays (such as nudity) and sexual communication (beyond soliciting). This has been partly linked to changes in American internet governance, most notably the 2018 twin bills of FOSTA/SESTA, which make internet intermediaries liable for the content posted by users, and which, due to its vagueness, led some platforms to overcorrect and ban whole swathes of content and communication (Lingel, 2020; Mollidrem, 2018; Paasonen et al., 2019; Spišák et al., 2021).

The platforms we study are developed by Swedish, Estonian, and Finnish companies, hosted on European Union (EU) servers and use EU-based payment processing services (e.g., Paytrail). Being subject to EU legislation, they are not directly impacted by SESTA/FOSTA. Developers and administrators rely on an emulative logic both when developing features and functionality, and when designing user guidelines and rules. Rather than direct copying, emulation indicates using external models as examples based on which superior solutions are built (Rudmark, 2021), so that it does not entail compliance with content policies enforced elsewhere. As discussed below, some international users displaced by SESTA/FOSTA migrated to sexual platforms and contributed to shaping their use rules and features. Finally, to

circumvent Apple's and Google's app store rules regulating sexual displays, but partly also due to lack of resources, all three platforms are available as websites rather than apps (or as partial functionality apps).

## Sexual Platforms as Infrastructures for Sociality

In the most obvious sense, sexual platforms are social media by virtue of having been designed as such by wishfully emulating and remixing elements from established mainstream platforms and their functionalities while also expanding their affordances for sexual ends. We make sense of the three studied platforms as built infrastructures for sociality through what we propose to be imitating, rejecting, and contextual emulation: developers emulate (Rudmark, 2021) the features and functionality, but also the governance principles and moderation solutions of local predecessors, generic global social media platforms and, occasionally, even those of one another.

Founded already in 2003, Darkside is one of few Swedish platforms that has not only survived but continues to thrive in the era of big social media. In the early 2000s, the online community Helgon.net (est. 2002) gathered people from a range of musical subcultures significantly overlapping with alternative sexual cultures and an affinity for latex, rubber, and leather. Together with Quiser (est. 2000), the largest Nordic web community for LGBTQ+ people, Helgon served as inspiration for Darkside, offering an infrastructure of sociality recognizable to those belonging to sexual subcultures. The webmaster who created Darkside and has run it for two decades describes the site having gone through a series of upgrades, some of its functionality emulating, but also pre-dating features from platforms like Facebook. For example, you have been able to add people as friends all along, but a personalized media stream or news feed is a more recent addition. "It is difficult to keep up with global tech giants," the webmaster says, yet hopes to strike a balance between the individualized feeds and profile-centric sociality of mainstream platforms and the sense of community afforded by shared spaces.

Darkside is based on an activist belief in kink outness in the name of sexual justice while also being protective of anonymous and pseudonymous forms of presence and sexual expression balanced by a system of "verifications" signaling a different kind of authenticity. The developer actively works toward offering a safe space which relies on moderating practices and automation when it comes to what is considered abusive content on the site (e.g., unsolicited dick pics). The developer told us that he would even like to take content regulation automation one step further so as to, with just a simple keystroke, compress a photo, attach a description of what happened and how, and file a report to the police: "It would be epic . . . if Darkside got this reputation that no one dares to send juicy dick pics to strangers, because they get all sensitive and pc about it."

Alastonsuomi (est. 2007) was created as an adult version of IRC-Galleria (est. 2000), a Finnish pre-Facebook market leader with a strict content policy concerning nudity and sex (Lehtinen, 2007; Suominen et al., 2013). Alastonsuomi retains much of IRC-Galleria's functionalities so as to represent a vintage approach to platform design: one participant identified it as a relic "that should be framed and put in a museum of technology." Alastonsuomi represents another iteration of emulation, this time through rejection and expansion by turning the nudity banned on IRC-Galleria into a pre-requisite for participation. It offers both free and VIP membership, the latter of which enables broader functionality. Since Alastonsuomi has only one designated moderator, moderation operates mainly through feedback forms and email from users. According to the TOS, the content posted must adhere to the Finnish law; users must be over 18, give their personal information when registering, post photos of themselves, and refrain from harassing others.

Libertine.Center (est. 2018) is the newest of our three sites and the only one established in the platform-economy era. Its features, functionality, and design have been concretely shaped by trends within the broader social media ecosystem. For example, its developers, who were Tumblr users, wanted to build something "like Tumblr," in terms of a platform that affords vibrant sexual cultures and the silosocial and meta-communicative use of hashtags, but with additional functionalities to compensate for what they thought "sucked" on Tumblr (Search, Messenger). They also wanted to add Tinderesque functionality because they presumed the intended users (swingers and group sex enthusiasts) needed it. And, as Libertine.Center was launched about 2 weeks prior to Tumblr's infamous NSFW ban in December 2018 (largely caused by FOSTA/SESTA), this development directly shaped it. According to the developers, Libertine.Center was included in some of the widely circulated lists of alternative platforms for "tumblr refugees" to go to: "We were brand new, we knew nothing, and then we had thousands of new accounts set up every day and everything was glitching. I mean, it was good too, we got everything fixed and beta tested really fast, but it was like a storm," one of them said.

The avalanche of platform "refugees" who tried to use every new site exactly as they had used Tumblr directly shaped the content moderation and governance principles of Libertine.Center, which responded by incorporating user verification and a freemium model to pre-moderate users rather than the content they post (cf. Tiidenberg, 2021). We return in more detail to verification and content moderation on all three platforms when discussing the silos of safety below.

Similar to Alastonsuomi, Libertine.Center's developers also enacted emulation through rejection, by envisioning and building their site to stand apart from another Estonian sexual site called iha.ee. That site is near identical to Alastonsuomi, having probably emulated it, as well as the image rating logic popular in the early 2000s, which the developers of Libertine.Center claimed "no younger couple

would go to" because they are used to and expect features like newsfeeds, timelines, and functionalities like verification. In addition to imitative and rejective emulation, there is then also the trend of contextualized emulation where site developers presume that users accustomed to the contemporary social media ecosystem will no longer accept previously popular platform designs, at least not without added or altered functionality.

Sweden, Estonia, and Finland are all countries with heavy mobile internet use, yet because of the sex-negative policies of app stores, these three platforms are not available as smartphone apps and their exclusion from the app economy certainly delimits their use. However, Libertine.Center, the developer of which argues that: ". . . if you don't have a mobile messenger app . . . that's it, you're done with the younger users," has a workaround, offering a Messenger-only mobile app. A process of reverse engineering of sociality emerges on all three platforms, the developers of which have emulated specific features and functionalities, tried to meet design expectations emerging from the broader social media ecology, and encourage particular types of use. Perhaps more interestingly, they have tried to reverse engineer features, functionalities, and governance policies from vernacular cultures they liked on other platforms and apps (e.g., Tumblr), somewhat naively presuming for these to result directly from the infrastructure.

## User Experiences of Socio-Sexual Silos: Sexy, Mundane Breathing Spaces

The sociality on our three sites is experienced on the axes of the social and the sexual. This deceptively trivial statement needs to be unpacked to demonstrate the granularities involved. On one hand, sex is fundamentally social, perhaps even the most intense order of sociality, a site where bodies come undone by coming together (Rodríguez, 2011). On the other hand, the degrees to which norms governing behavior in public places (Goffman, 1966) have separated the social and the sexual in most societies cannot be underestimated. This separation is further codified and reified online (McKee et al., 2015) so that sex in social media is subject to a "trifecta of anxieties" emerging from preexisting concerns regarding overlaps between sexuality, publicness, and the internet (Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020).

On the studied platforms, social exchanges are framed on sexual terms by default and users can look for hook-ups, play dates or simply at each other. The intense sociality of sex thus becomes a glue that interlinks bodies, and makes and shapes connectivity. For users, these platforms function as socio-sexual "silos" (Tiidenberg et al., 2021) within their broader social media ecologies: they are sustained by shared interests and relationships which lead to the spaces being experienced as ones that offer respite and allow for blending the sexual with the non-sexual in ways that invite self-presentations that feel authentic.

This became particularly clear in comparisons made toward the kinds of sociality that our interviewees saw most social spaces, as well as generic social media, as encouraging. As a single female Libertine.Center user said,

it's a handy platform, because it brings together people who, well, . . . like in a nightclub . . . how do you get to this point as a single woman, where after I meet a guy for a one night stand, I tell him: "hey, let's find one more guy to take with us," it's really difficult with a random person on the street, but really easy here.

In addition to being able to start sexual conversations much closer to the point, users shared that the friends they had made on the platform were more open-minded, and more socially and sexually active than their "other friends."

Discussing what sustains the socio-sexual silo that is Alastonsuomi, a "mostly straight" man in his 40s describes the platform as a "breathing space" shared with other people

nerding off on sexuality and taking a liberal approach to sexuality, and having this open-minded approach. I've found lots of people who share the same values and with whom I've developed friendships with over time. It's, yeah, many great people have entered my life through it, and I'm really happy having found them.

The man had a child with another Alastonsuomi user ("I'd mark that as one of the site's achievements") and had traveled abroad with friends met through the site. A woman in her 30s (identifying as "relationship-anarchistic polyamorous kinky") similarly described the platform as her key social hub, both sexual and not. Interactions with platform-sourced friends regularly expand to ostensibly unsexy endeavors such as going on a hike or helping to redo the roof of a country house.

While generic social media sites increasingly forbid sexually explicit content, "non-sexual" content and interactions are part of the blended sociality that emerges on the studied platforms (we discuss the boundary work involved in this below, in the section "Context promiscuity"). Darkside users, for example, add "non-kinky" interests such as "choir singing" or "knitting" to their profiles so as to differently approach and connect with others. A queer, female Darkside user is a passionate knitter and has met others in the community for dates at cafés under the name "naughty knitting," "though there was really nothing naughty about it, we just knitted." However, building on the tradition of munches and other casual gatherings in the world of kink and BDSM, the seemingly mundane, non-sexual or indeed unsexy always comes lined with the knowledge of being in the company of other kinksters. This carries the potential of the interaction growing sexy later on, or it can just entail the tacit pleasure of sharing wants and desires that may remain unarticulated in a particular social context, yet provide a meaningful presence.

There is dynamism to how experiences of these silos change over time and depend on users making sense of their designs

and features in comparison with the broader social media ecosystem. In other words, the platforms' perceived socio-sexual affordances are not static. Our participants made comparisons with other platforms—for example describing Darkside, Alastonsuomi and Libertine.Center as "Facebook for adults," "pervy Facebook," or "sex-Insta"—and highlighted both the perceived benefits and limitations of generic social media in doing so. As metaphors, defined as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another," always illuminate some aspects and eclipse others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5), such comparisons hint at expectations and judgments over forms of networked sociality. The three platforms were cast as allowing similar connectivity as Instagram, OKCupid, or Tinder, yet also as encouraging more intense, "sexier," or "improved" kinds of sociality wherein users can more openly express their desires. As an interviewee put it, "Alastonsuomi is where I can most be myself, whereas Facebook is like the public image visible to all, where you have to behave according to all social norms and such." Comparisons were also drawn to sexual platforms like FetLife, Pornhub, and OnlyFans. Another interviewee said,

if Libertine.Center didn't help with hooking up, then I don't think I would use this site that much, I'm not really into . . . virtual staring, it doesn't really offer me much, I mean . . . if that is what I am after I prefer just going to Pornhub.

Our interviewees' experiences were importantly constrained by the sites' functionalities as well as by expectations concerning the social media ecosystem and its transformations over time. For example, many Alastonsuomi users define it as social media that misses key functionalities due to it having gone through only one larger redesign since its launch 15 years ago. Darkside, too, reaches back to an era of early online communities with a distinct underground feel while also stretching forward to a time of large social media platforms. The participants fondly remember the smaller community of those early years consisting of a quite tightly knit group of people who took support from each other on social and sexual margins, providing a vital breathing space.

The dated designs of Alastonsuomi and Darkside make for ambivalent user experiences. On one hand, there is a clear sense of safety rooted in nostalgia for an era when the communities were smaller, if also more marginalized. On the other hand, many users commented on their experiences of "ugly" design and, more broadly, on how sexual platforms tend not to get upgraded: "it gives people sort of the impression that this kind of sexuality and open-mindedness and the people interested in this stuff, that they're like a little seedy and grubby." For some, this complaint expanded to the perceived poor technical and artistic quality of the photos published by users so that the platform comprised an aesthetic fold somehow just lagging behind. A similar critique, where dated design and functionality incited judgment over content, users and sociality alike, was evident in how developers and

users of *Libertine.Center* addressed the older Estonian site, *iha.ee*, which all of them had previous or current experience with. Yet, for some *Alastonsuomi* users, the unpolished feel was also a positive marker of distinction: “it’s, like a little edgier and a little rougher”; “it’s a little aged, the design and the look, which probably adds its own edge to it, so that we’re not on some polished Facebook or Instagram just now.”

Finally, users’ experiences of sociality are shaped by the highly limited app-based functionality across the studied platforms, especially for *Alastonsuomi* and *Darkside*, which have no mobile apps in a context where online porn consumption and hooking-up are very much managed through smartphones. This is a distinct source of frustration particularly among gay male users used to a plethora of connective tools. Thus, a *Darkside* user describes the platform as a jumping off point where additional apps and platforms have to be incorporated to fulfill one’s needs: “It doesn’t even have a chat function . . . it has a messaging function and as such is far too slow for your half hour window of opportunity.”

All in all, our participants spoke of the platforms as affording finding, meeting, and hanging out with other people who are similarly sexually relaxed and generally open-minded; access to a “breathing space” where one doesn’t have to so tightly constrain oneself to fit mainstream norms of propriety; hooking-up (although the different platforms enable that with varying ease and comfort); presenting oneself in ways that are experienced and articulated as “more authentic”; and the blending of sexy and non-sexy aspects of everyday life and sociality in ways that generic social media discourage.

All this yields a very particular type of sexual sociality—one experienced as more social than that of sex-only platforms, more sexual than that of generic social media platforms, but also more intensely social than that of generic social media platforms. This, we argue, points to silosocial experiences of the social media ecosystem where technologies, corporate interests, individual and group practices, norms, and ideas converge in ways accommodating certain degrees and types of sexual display and exchange. The boundaries between such silos can be porous and users may disagree on what platforms are best for which purposes. While our participants complained of the platforms’ technical limitations, they also worked around them so that these did not, for the most part, curb user interest. Use was, however, described as situational rather than constant: months spent without spending time on the site could be followed by periods of extensive engagement, and mundane routine browsing could be intercepted by acute interest. Across all this, friendships established through the sites continued without necessarily remaining on-platform only.

### **Silos of Safety: Sexual Co-Existence in Open Mindedness**

*Alastonsuomi*, *Darkside*, and *Libertine.Center* are experienced as silos separated by permeable yet noticeable

boundaries from other platforms, social ties, and expressive modes within users’ lives, yet since experiential silos emerge from, and are defined by shared interests and sustained by shared practices, vernaculars, and sensibilities, any singular platform can accommodate any number of them (Tiidenberg et al., 2021). Different users of the same platform can have distinctly different understandings of its social codes, for example. This then results in users having varying understandings of what these platforms are like, or for—intensely social, lacking in sociality, rude, encouraging, normative, and heterogeneous. Platforms further scale internally so that there is the silo enveloping all its users; silos for broader taste communities of gay men, cross-dressers, kinksters or swingers, as well as a plethora of smaller silos comprised of “meet families” formed according to sexual likes and friendships formed over time.

On the studied platforms, experiential silos emerged and diverged most notably due to differences in use, socio-sexual expectations, and notions of safety. For some, these platforms are mainly porn sites, for others they function as social platforms and, for yet others, they are very much both. With respect to *Alastonsuomi*, some emphasized its positive culture of commenting in comparison with more mainstream social media: according to these views, there is less trolling, more acceptance, and little judgment as per sexual tastes so that the site comprises a place where all can sexually exist. The kink ethos “Your kink is not my kink, but your kink is ok” may indeed help in fostering support of sexual diversity and difference, and as a way of safeguarding a community from stigmatization and shaming. Meanwhile, others described *Alastonsuomi* as a site for “random shouting behind user names” where moderation practices had not been much improved since its launch: “this site like just drifts, which is part of its charm, but it’s probably also a pretty horrible place if, I dunno, you’re somehow particularly vulnerable a person.”

Such differences in experiences of spaces meant to be safe for a broad range of users and sexual expressions may riddle social encounters with tension. On *Darkside*, this becomes a question of one’s proximity to straight, cis-male norms. While clearly sex-positive at its core, *Darkside* is construed as a social space where safety takes shape through consent. The image galleries are full of sexually explicit images, but—very much in contrast with *Alastonsuomi*’s platform vernaculars—depictions of genitals are not allowed as profile pictures and non-consensual dick pics are routinely reported as abuse.

Consent-based safe spaces are also construed through self-censorship and self-regulation in anticipation of, or to avoid, being reported or simply outed as a harasser. Straight male *Darkside* users often avoid altogether giving what they consider to be a compliment to female users posting nudes or almost-nudes. Female users in turn detail how posting pictures of bare breasts may not be a matter of seeking positive validation from strangers, but merely from friends. As a queer female user put it,

Some use it as a dating site, others more as a kind of pervy Facebook. You have it for your friend circle. These are very different approaches, which also becomes clear through clashes and misunderstandings. If you post a picture of your breasts, then you surely want someone to write something objectifying? But perhaps you don't want that at all.

A sense of safety is also afforded by platform governance policies, in particular through combinations of anonymity or pseudonymity with systems of verification. In line with 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 (Cassidy, 2013; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016; Triggs et al., 2021), a system of verification provides a seal of security by safeguarding user privacy. But it also becomes a way of separating “us” from “them.”

On *Libertine.Center*, the large proportion of verified accounts (made visible through a green check mark on one's profile) are experienced as differentiating the platform from other local alternatives (e.g., *iha.ee*) that are described as overtaken by sex workers, transactional sociality, as well as “spam” and “trash” accounts that bombard (female) users with rote messages asking to meet in exchange for a “gift,” lie about who the users are, or why they are on the site. In contrast, our interviewees deem the users on *Libertine.Center*—even though still pseudonymous, and for the most part not posting pictures of their face—to be “real people and I think . . . nice people, not just shadowprofiles.” This dynamic makes for gradients of experienced authenticity where platform-driven verification is seen as guaranteeing that users are “actually libertines,” and not just “creepy liars” who will “never want to do anything fun together.” *Darkside* takes the system of verifications one step further, as you can collect as many verifications of “you being you” as you wish—some have hundreds, others have none—thus creating hierarchical gradients of sincerity and investment. On *Alastonsuomi*, registration necessitates posting a profile photo showing one's face, naked body, or both. These can be openly viewed without registration and they need to be approved by the administrators insisting on sufficient explicitness and checking for visuals repurposed from the web.

### **Context Promiscuity: A Partially Deliberate Blending of Data and Contexts**

Mainstream social media platforms are heteronormative in how they are built and the kinds of sociality they support, yet they can also be seen as queer in how they propel networked promiscuity, multiple intimacies, parallel connections, and fleeting attachments (Haber, 2017; Payne, 2015; Sundén, 2018). Such fluid or slutty forms of relating and connecting are nevertheless consistently troubled by how both content

and audiences are distributed within and between platforms and their respective normative frames.

In their influential discussion of context collapse on Twitter, Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd (2011) address the conflation of multiple audiences into single contexts—as in, say, one's account being simultaneously followed by friends, family members, colleagues, sexual partners, and random strangers. Such collapse necessitates boundary work, especially in how personal or intimate information is revealed (Light, 2014). The need for boundary maintenance is further accelerated when having identifiable presence on multiple platforms. On leading social media platforms, sexual content is variously coded as “sensitive,” “objectionable,” and “NSFW” in ways implying that disclosures of sexual tastes, preferences, identifications, and experiences fall into gray zones of social acceptability at best. Such coding, and the governance practices connected to it, invites a tactic of siloed self-presentation and sociality across one's personal social media ecosystem, so that someone with a visible kink presence on a sexual site may choose to disclose no details concerning their sexual identities, experiences, or preferences on Instagram, and their friendship circles on the platforms may have little overlap.

This, however, does not entail complete silence as differences remain between signaling belonging to sexual communities and being detailed about the specificities and directions of one's desires (see Sundén, forthcoming b). For a minority of users whose social circles were well aware (and part) of their sexual self-expression, or who were activists, sex educators, or visible kinksters in Pride parades, there was little managing of context collapse as it was quite intentional. Most of our interviewees, however, experienced sexual sites as silos with no or limited overlap with social networks maintained and developed on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, or in hook-up apps. The question was primarily one of sexual outness (Fox & Warber, 2015). “Although I've been long on the site, and in BDSM scenes, I'm fully closeted about this stuff,” a female *Alastonsuomi* user explained, “I somehow feel that my sexuality is nobody's business except mine and those with whom I want to be. I have no need to announce to my family that I use this sort of site.”

Such boundary work is nevertheless leaky. For many, content bleed—and sometimes both intentional and unintentional data bleed (cf. Duguay, 2016)—occurs across sexual and generic social media platforms. Rather than context collapse, we identify this as “context promiscuity”—a partially purposeful blending of contexts while maintaining their structural integrity. *Darkside* users, for example, may imply their interests on Facebook by replying to kink event invitations or by belonging to kink themed groups, even if these tend to be closed or secret: in many cases, cues of sexual lives remain and can be traced across platforms and user profiles. People may pose with a subtle choker or combine a heart emoji with a fist in their status updates, ripe for

interpretation for those who know how to read the signals. There is thus a range of kink visibility to mainstream social media, from being out and proud (which only a few can afford) to subtle, barely visible signs and traces which nonetheless build a sense of normalcy in otherness by signaling alternate ways of living and existing.

For some of our participants, the optimal solution would be to do away with social (media) silos altogether so as to expand the shame-free sociality associated with sexual platforms to more general modes of being. A bi-curious straight cis-man in his 30s speaks of dreaming of a society

where I have an Alastonsuomi profile showing my cock and my body and my sex life and my face. And even if my boss knows about it, it's fine, and not only is it fine, it's in no way awkward. So, it'd be ok to find you with a nick there and if someone wants to check out your equipment or the kind of ass you have, go ahead, it's there. I'd so enjoy if the world could be like that one day.

Even in a world where such openness is not viable as a rule, sexual sociality is a joining force that moves across and interlinks people, groups, events, meet-ups, platforms, and apps so as to give shape to both local and networked sexual cultures. Our participants speak of how their online presences form a continuum crafted in accordance with platform content policies and social vernaculars as ones of varying sexual explicitness. For some, their presence expands from Instagram and Facebook to Tinder and Grindr, and further to Xperience United, SDC, FetLife, and OnlyFans, so that their accounts can be followed in connection with one another. There is also more bilateral platform traffic, as in hearing about Alastonsuomi on Tinder or sharing links to Alastonsuomi profiles on Tinder so as to disclose sexual preferences in ways not afforded by the app's terms of use. Some Libertine.Center users have set up chat groups where those interested can share their profiles on "other adult sites."

Yet others connect apps and platforms based on practical needs or in accordance to degrees of trust. Given Alastonsuomi's limited messaging options, the default intermediary for many users is Kik, an anonymous messenger app that necessitates no sharing of phone numbers. It was, however, typical on all three platforms to turn to general-purpose apps like WhatsApp, Messenger, Instagram, and Facebook as trust between users becomes established. "Transitioning to Facebook" can be considered a relationship stage as people either become online friends or hook-up with one another in enjoyable ways. The sharing of Facebook profiles was further interpreted as indicative of trustworthiness that can speed up the development of sexual relationships (exchanging pictures, arranging a date).

Content and data do not merely bleed from sexual platforms to mainstream ones: there is also traffic in the other direction, which can become a point of contention. There are plenty of members who use Darkside almost similarly to

Facebook by posting pictures of their knitting or news of their pregnancy—"and not pregnancy kink even, but that they actually got pregnant." The interviewees are nevertheless protective of this remaining a special place which you can seek out to get horny, to feel your kink side come alive, and to check in on your friends and their diaries covering recent play sessions—their pictures of fresh bruises proudly displayed as trophies. They take great pleasure in logging in to see that "so and so has made cinnamon buns and so and so got a good spanking." While wishing for de-stigmatization and more openness on sexual expression, they also want to protect that which makes this place distinctive. Or, as a queer female user puts it, "too much everydayness kills the magic."

## Conclusions

Intimate lives are increasingly made public through the use of social media platforms (Dobson et al., 2018), yet sexual displays, expressions, and communication involved in this are actively policed and pushed back into presumably private domains. In a contentious social media landscape where sex and sexuality are simultaneously rendered visible, commodified, and plain banned, we see sexual platforms as important loci for advancing sexual sociality and queer bonds through tactically planned online presences and deliberated shifts from pseudonymous to non-anonymous connections (Weiner & Young, 2011, p. 223). "Queer," in this context, does not only pertain to sexual identities (as these platforms house significant "straight" contingents) but to the bending and challenging of heteronormative, "SWF" social media sociality as well as to twisting understandings of sexual likes and practices through promiscuous, kinky, and non-monogamous means.

Our interview data 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 participants speak of sexuality as fundamental to how social bonds take shape and develop, and of the importance, gravity, pleasure, and ease of connecting with others similarly attuned when it comes to sex. The data also suggest of alternative analytical approaches to the perceived risks and harms of social media, ones which expand to the things lost when ousting sex from networked forms of sociality. What kinds of experiences, contacts, and explorations become zoned out, and at what expense?

Consider, for example, a male 40-something Alastonsuomi user who has been a registered member for a decade, and for whom the site documents his presence

in social media also as a sexual creature. That's a quarter of my life, and . . . about half of my adulthood. So, I do feel that it's been a much more rewarding half of my adulthood, the one where I've been sexually able to express, or where I've been able to express my sexual identity and being.

The removal of sex from social media delimits sexual sociality for all and truncates ways of understanding what makes the self and what interests, forces, and attachments drive people on levels both individual and collective. Such truncation disproportionately targets sexual cultures, practices, and identities already deemed marginal, such as the self-proclaimed “perverts,” kinksters, swingers, cross-dressers, and exhibitionists interviewed for this study.

Attempts to make social media safer, we argue, do not 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 the users 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.

The current deplatforming of sex can be seen as a direct threat to an understanding of intimacy both in relation to sexual rights, responsibilities, and a need for recognition and in terms of a broader understanding of sexual lives and the importance of desires and pleasures for our ways of being in the world. “Both political and social theory tend to deny the sexual,” Ken Plummer argues, as “‘the intimate’ is routinely minimized, written out, ‘trashed’” (Plummer, 2007, p. 389). He discusses public, democratic, and plural forms of sexuality and intimacy which challenge their confinement in private spaces that may be both exploitative and oppressive. In a social media landscape where sex and sexual expression are increasingly pushed out, the sexual platforms detailed in this article and the testimonies of their users provide important examples of social media use as a means of sexual freedom, learning, enjoyment, and emancipation.

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