

Vanilla normies and fellow pervs: Boundary work on sexual platforms

Sexualities
2023, Vol. 0(0) 1–17
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DOI: 10.1177/13634607231215763
journals.sagepub.com/home/sex



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Abstract

Building on a study of three Nordic and Baltic digital sexual platforms, this article analyzes the perceptions of enjoyable sex and sexual belonging among 60 people, who self-identify as sexually liberal. In dialogue with Gayle Rubin's formative work on sexual hierarchies and "good sex," we explore our participants' complex and often ambiguous sexual boundary work to delineate liberated sex. Independent of particular preferences (non-monogamy, BDSM, fetishism, and exhibitionism), liberated sex for our participants is definitionally enjoyable and articulated via an aspirational hierarchy based on willingness, diversity/variability, and self-reflexivity—partly set against national sexual imaginaries of vanilla normalcy, yet allowing vanilla some gradations and nuances.

Keywords

Boundary work of "good sex", digital sexual platforms, liberated sex, national sexual imaginaries, vanilla normalcy

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Introduction

Intimate, regulatory, moral, and academic conversations about sex often try, and fail, to delineate what kinds of sex are good, for whom, why, and what good sex might even mean. Meanwhile, online spaces for sexual sociality allow people to connect with like-minded others, resist pressures to conform, and discover novel tastes and modes of being so as to negotiate the shapes and forms of good sex on levels both personal and collective (Nixon and Düsterhöft, 2017; Paasonen et al., 2023; Tiidenberg and Van der Nagel, 2020). Building on a three-year research project of three Nordic and Baltic digital sexual platforms—the Estonian Libertine.Center (est. 2018) used primarily by non-monogamists, the Swedish Darkside (est. 2003) preferred by BDSM and kink practitioners, and the Finnish Alastonsuomi (est. 2007) dedicated to nudity and sex—this article examines their users’ perceptions of the kinds of sex they enjoy. Our interests lie in how the people describe personal, subcultural, and historical forms of sexual belonging and articulate them in relation to the perceived mainstream. These articulations involve activation and movement of symbolic boundaries around *liberated* sex, regularly mapped out against the idea of *vanilla normalcy*.

Lamont and Molnár (2002: 168) describe symbolic boundary practices as conceptual distinctions that people make in order to “categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space.” Further, moral boundaries—a subsection of symbolic boundaries—are distinctions made specifically to deem certain behaviors deviant in some contexts but not in others (Lauderdale, 1976). As much previous work has shown, boundary work is key to how both sexual normalcy (e.g., Fjær et al., 2015; Rubin, 1989; Sprott et al., 2021; Warner, 2000) and variations of “good,” “good-enough,” or even “magnificent” sex (Hargons et al., 2022; Kleinplatz and Ménard, 2020; Metz and McCarthy, 2003) take shape and become regulated. In what follows, we explore the boundary dynamics of our participants’ perceptions of sexual norms within their countries of residence, in their sexual lifestyle, and subcultural groups (e.g., BDSM practitioners, naturalists, cross dressers, fetishists, swingers, and relationship anarchists), as well as on the sexual platforms they use. We focus on the tacit value hierarchies their boundary activation and movement hinge on, paying attention to what desires and practices become deemed as contextually “valid or invalid, appropriate or inappropriate” in the process (Weeks, 2017: 138).

In addressing sex they enjoy and articulating “liberated sex,” our study participants perform something of a reversal of the sexual hierarchy that Gayle Rubin outlined in her formative article “Thinking Sex.” Broadly outlining the governance of sex in Western cultures, and engaging with the 1980s US context in particular, Rubin posed the issue as gatekeeping “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” from its opposite—the “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned.” Here, “good sex” is the terrain of heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial exchanges practiced in pairs of individuals of the same generation, in private and without the aid of pornography, sex toys, or other paraphernalia. The “bad,” by extension, entails sex that “may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place in orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in ‘public’, or at

least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles” (Rubin, 1989: 281). For Rubin, the perceived goodness and badness of sex are issues of social normativity, and of boundary work wherein some exchanges became cast as aspirational; others not. Our interviewees, in contrast, delineate their preferences—and their version of “liberated sex”—against the notion of uninteresting “vanilla sex” (aka Rubin’s “good sex”).

Rubin’s article addressed the US context and, as her numerous afterwords to it show, the political concerns raised there came into even sharper focus during the following decade (see Rubin, 2011). Her model of sexual hierarchy has been highly influential to how sexual normativity has been examined as a form of social governance both in the US and beyond (e.g., Ho, 2006; Kulick, 2005; Warner, 2000). Since the model is a historical one, it is not surprising for such norms to change according to time and place, so that even as the prioritization on matrimonial vanilla sex rings familiar internationally, there is considerable complexity to how sexual norms become recognized, articulated, and lived—and, indeed, the degree to which they can be confined in schematic accounts such as the one offered by Rubin. Our interest lies not in outlining sexual hierarchies in Estonia, Sweden, and Finland—such a project being well beyond the scope of any single article—but rather in how our participants valorize sexual liberation and open-mindedness over the assumed tedium of vanilla so as to articulate an aspirational kind of sexual hierarchy, explicitly playing with the cultural, normative, and political construct of what Rubin framed as “good sex.”

After addressing our data and methods, we first discuss our participants’ articulations of the sex they value and prefer, outlined as *willing*, *diverse/variable*, and *self-reflexive*. Second, we discuss how the sex people enjoy becomes set apart from the notion of “vanilla,” as operationalized through national imaginaries involving broader sexual normativity. We then demonstrate the complexity and occasional ambiguity of this boundary work around sexual norms and conclude by exploring the stakes involved in the valorization of “non-vanilla.”

Context and method

As sexual content and communication are increasingly tightly moderated on leading social media platforms (Blunt et al., 2021; Mollrem, 2018), sexual sociality has clustered on hook-up apps on the one hand and on platforms designed for sexual interaction, on the other. Our previous work has demonstrated that sexual social media platforms shape and constrain users’ sense of sociality, selfhood, safety, and proximity in relation to the broader social media ecosystem; and that these platforms help to constitute silos that function both as sexual places and as tools for sexual wayfinding in users’ everyday lives (Paasonen et al., 2023; Sundén et al., 2022). As such, sexual platforms and their role in users’ everyday lives are key in negotiating the shapes and forms of sex people enjoy.

To study experiences and perceptions of sex that is enjoyable, and to explore in more depth how this kind of sex is articulated, we analyze 60 in-depth interviews conducted with people who all self-identify as sexually liberal and were actively using Lib-ertine.Center, Alastonsuomi, and Darkside between 2020 and 2022. Our participants

describe their sexual appetites, preferences, practices, and lifestyles as varying from online-only exhibitionism to swinging, to event-only BDSM, to cross-dressing, to 24/7 fetishism. Some self-label as “open-minded,” “sexually liberated,” or “libertine,” while others opt for more lifestyle specific terminology (such as “kinkster,” “fetishist,” “lifestyler,” or “perv”)—yet across these categories our participants generally set their orientations apart from vanilla normalcy. The interviewees’ sexual self-identifications vary from straight to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer; most are cis-gendered (with one trans-man and some identifying as non-binary *and* female among our participants). Whenever we quote participants in the following, we identify them by their country of origin, the platform they use, and the sexual self-identification that they shared with us. They are white and speak Estonian, Finnish, or Swedish as their first language, with occasional migrants also making the sample. Our interviewees’ participation has likely been motivated by the importance they attribute to sex in their lives, their interest in discussing sexual topics, as well as their active use of the studied platforms.

Most of the interviews were conducted on Zoom, as these took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. They lasted 1–2 h and were then transcribed and open-coded. For this article, we collated all coded data pertaining to articulations of sexual liberation; definitions and descriptions of sex both enjoyable and less so; mentions of vanilla; description of sexual norms and values one lives by, sees in the society, or notices on the platform and its varied communities; perceptions on changes within sexual norms and the causes behind them; perceptions of changes within one’s own sexuality and the reasons attributed to them, as well as references to the pleasures and ethics of sex. 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 focused on sexual boundary dynamics (Abbott, 1995; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Tilly, 2004). Our project has approval from the ethics review boards of each of our respective universities in Finland and Estonia and from The Swedish Ethical Review Authority (a national government agency). We handled interview data in ways compliant with the GDPR and relied on explicit informed consent from research participants.

Liberated sex

Broadly, the overarching value to which our participants orient their understanding of sex is sexual liberation (if not necessarily sexual freedom as such). Liberation, in this context, is not coupled with political movements advancing sexual equality inasmuch as with more personal forms of learning, knowledge, and experimentation, in which sexual platforms play a key part. Interviewees define their own sexual practices and preferences as liberated and open-minded: our Estonian and Finnish participants use the terms *vabameelne* and *vapaamielinen* (the languages are related, so the word is etymologically the same) that have a long history of being used for the sexually open-minded and also those who have frequent sex or many sexual partners. Many of our Finnish participants further self-identify as “pervs” (from *pervertikko*) which, in its vernacular uses, flexibly and humorously refers to sexual tastes and outlooks of the non-normative sort.¹

Through these definitions, our interviewees position themselves in relation to and as standing out from dominant cultural sexual imaginaries (Gatens, 1996: viii). Gatens argues that (individual and collective) bodies are not given but imagined, highlighting “those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment.” According to Gatens (1996), these imaginaries shape people’s subjectivity and influence their potential for various kinds of sociability, which we see in how our participants imagine and describe themselves differently as a way to feel differently in relation to others—a point to which we return to in the context of national sexual imaginaries.

Our interviewees also tacitly link liberation and its divergence from what they perceive as normative sex in their discussions of sex they enjoy, so that enjoyable sex and sexual liberation become co-constitutive, and for many ontologically countercultural. This boundary work is sometimes enacted explicitly but generally unfolds through a series of boundaries activated and moved to fence out, or to encompass practices, preferences, and ways of being, thus exposing an implicit taxonomy pertaining to situational and contextual sexual boundary work. Our participants create symbolic and sometimes moral boundaries between “normal” people with their waning sexual willingness and boring normative vanilla tastes, and the contingent category of “us” liberated people. This collective denominator refers to the users of the studied sexual platforms, to specific sexual subcultures, inasmuch as to groups constituted by a partial overlap between the two. As we’ll go on to show, these groups emerge dynamically from the activation of situational, occasionally nested, overlapping, or contradictory boundaries.

Willing, variable, and self-reflexive

Experiences and definitions of liberated sex in our data entail articulation of boundaries around the notions of *willingness*, *variability/diversity*, and *self-reflexivity*. It is *willing* in the sense that it is wanted, there is a lot of sex; but also in the sense that the sex is enacted by people characterized by a willing orientation towards the world. When describing themselves, and others like them, our interviewees relied on words signaling an openness (“open,” “honest,” and “curious,”) but also a sense of activeness (“active” and “up for anything,”) and boundary-pushing (“self-confident,” “out there,” “easily bored,” and “thrill seeking”). Willingness to experiment with and push boundaries is central to many of our participants’ kink practices as well as their understanding of liberated sex. Others, like our Swedish BDSM practicing interviewee Karin, however, problematize this focus on boundary-pushing:

Sometimes Darkside feels a bit like the person with the least resistance wins. That it somehow becomes a bit of an extreme, how can I put it, it becomes a bit of a dick measuring contest. The most advanced strokes, or knots, or bruises. I would probably say that good sex here is to be as “out there” as possible. Those who just like a bit of rough sex can be mocked on Darkside, (...) On Darkside, it often goes like this: “I like to push your boundaries. I like to test where your limits are. Together we take it one step further”. So, there is a lot of this on

people's profiles that you should always be ready and willing to go a little further. You have to be ready to push yourself. That's the ultimate sexuality.

Here, liberated sex hinges on platform-mediated norms that regulate bodies, power dynamics, and boundaries connected to skill, intensity, or a certain extremeness of practice. While Karin's certainly values intensity, she also values a dynamic that does not presume intensity to be the ultimate goal. On the one hand then, a "zone of difference" (Abbot, 1995: 877) is created around willingness as characteristic to the us-group and the sex that one enjoys. On the other hand, further boundary dynamics occur within that zone to differentiate what willingness means in particular situations and for particular people. Further still, willingness as an orientation towards the world can take on broader meanings, implying not only one's attitudes towards sexual practice, sensation, and pleasure but rather a general approach to life. Estonian swingers Mikk and Mari recount:

Mikk: well ... curiosity is the main thing, if we want to create a hierarchy of people, and there is a hierarchy ... the people who actually break out of the fantasy and are willing to meet up, do something (...) are open, curious, socially active (...) what else, courageous ... Actually, we have noticed that in the past four years our social circle has transformed. (...) And we've noticed that the main difference between our old friends and this new group is that they are really willing, open and always ready for whatever.

Mari: they go with the flow

Mikk: they go with the flow. You might need help fixing the roof and it's the "weird" friends that show up instead of making excuses. (...) The mindset is not "I can't," it's "how can I make it happen."

But liberated sex is not merely willing: it is also *diverse* and *variable*. Willing, active, open-minded people, we were repeatedly told, have diverse, imaginative, and skilled (cf. Harviainen and Frank, 2018) sex unbound from taboos and traditions, such as those devaluing promiscuity. Our Finnish interviewee Juhani explains:

In a way it means, yeah, sexually promiscuous, it means that you can have sex in many ways both physically and also, visually, it comes with the clothes and the accessories and everything else (...) fundamentally that it's active. It's not once a month as is in some relationships, or once a week as it is in others. But it's several times a week, or even several times a day, and in many different ways.

Finally, liberated sex is, for our interviewees, enacted among people who are *self-reflexive* about it—both in terms of their personal sex and how they practice it, and in how they relate to the governance of sex in public discourse. They articulate a symbolic boundary (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) around the amorphous "us" of the sexually liberated who are interested in sexual knowledge and sociability and less governed by taboos in how they judge their own desires and those of others. Through this boundary, sex they

enjoy is cast as accommodating different desires, proclivities, and identifications, even those that one does not share. Jenni, a Finnish participant, opines:

In a way, how I, how liberally I perceive other people versus how liberal I am as an actor myself. So, the fact that, of course, as a subjective human being there are always my own uncertainties in the background that I have to process and work through, and that I have to be open and honest with my partners, so that I can feel good, and let others around me feel good too. But in addition to that, I also feel that I can perceive the diversity of sexual, gender, and human relations quite extensively, so I can accept people's sexuality in a very open and understanding way.

Self-reflexivity is often discussed using the language of personal transformation, of having grown—also thanks to the internet and the platforms studied—into a person who knows and accepts both their own desires and sexual diversity more broadly (cf. [Beckmann, 2009](#): 232, 239). It was also described as a way of owning the struggles it took to get to that place, an inclination to relate to the world in a sexually open manner.

Vernaculars of vanilla

In our data, the boundaries that operationalize the values of willingness, variability/diversity, and self-reflexivity into enjoyable sexual practices often rely on what we call the “vernaculars of vanilla.” Vanilla is a popular term used to speak of conventional, unimaginative, normative sex, not least so within kink communities defining themselves against the category (e.g., [Chalkidou, 2022](#): 571; [Landridge and Butt, 2004](#): 42–43; [Pohtinen, 2019](#); [Rehberg, 2019](#)). By associating vanilla with the sexual practices of others, our participants equate “non-vanilla” with the kind of liberated and enjoyable sex that they themselves prefer. Within this boundary work, non-vanilla becomes defined via personal kinks or lifestyles, so that for our swinger-identifying participants vanilla signifies monogamy and non-vanilla the freedom of non-monogamy; for our BDSM practicing participants, vanilla is non-kinky sex and BDSM liberating; for yet others, and more opaquely, vanilla means heteronormativity and bland “romantic naughtiness.” Framed expansively as an issue of “vanilla world,” the notion can mark not only boundaries between sexual normalcy and sex deviating from it but also between sexual and non-sexual forms of relating, as in the Finnish Tapio's discussion of his “vanilla” and “perv” browsers:

When I use my vanilla browser, it has for example news and kid's sports hobbies and I look at, well, different stuff, whatever comes out of such vanilla world. And then I have a separate browser, where I have, for example, been logged into my Alastonsuomi profile and FetLife profile and there's some Pornhub and different sites connected to sexuality.

While Tapio articulates something of a pragmatic division within his technology use, for others the issue is more explicitly one of value judgments. Often, valuations are attributed based on gradients of commitment on the continuum from vanilla to non-

vanilla. For example, according to our participants, rubber and latex fetishism is in high regard on Darkside, whereas fetishism involving something like colorful, soft yarn is not. Latex becomes a valid choice (Weeks, 2017) due to its aesthetic qualities, the fact that it photographs well, and because it ties into more mainstream ideas of edgy sexiness. It is thus a normative signifier of non-normative sexuality, something that, as one of our Swedish participants, Sara, puts it: “mainstream society understands.” Margot Weiss (2006: 105) argues that an increasing presence of BDSM imagery in popular culture allows people “to flirt with danger and excitement,” while at the same time being conditioned by sexual norms that reinforce the boundaries between vanilla and deviant sex (cf. Beckmann, 2009: 4). But the kind of “vanilla intelligibility” that becomes operable on Darkside seems to rather screw with norms and boundaries between kink and not-kink, making them less distinct in the process.

Further, poly-normativity is strong, not only among our non-monogamist participants but equally among our kinksters, to the extent that people often felt the need to “explain” a monogamous orientation (cf. Fennell, 2022). The non-monogamous participants position cheating monogamists lower in the hierarchy of liberation than faithful ones, but non-monogamous couples as the most liberated (cf. Conley et al., 2019). Consistently with that, experienced non-monogamist couples self-identify, and are often portrayed by others in the community, as having ascended to a higher level of sexual liberation. This has less to do with the sex they practice than with the presumption that practicing liberated sex transforms a person, a couple, and their relationship. Arguably, however, the discourse of transformation validates (Weeks, 2017) non-normative sexual practices through their legibility to normative discourse—fucking other people is liberating if it strengthens the marriage. Peeter, an Estonian self-identified “veteran-lifestyler” describes the impact practicing non-monogamy has had on himself and his relationship:

it has improved and strengthened our relationship very much, not that there was anything wrong with us before (...) I just can't imagine the situation where I would cheat on my wife today. It's just ... it just doesn't exist (...) And it's exactly the same for her (...) but this kind of relational confidence, or this kind of trust in each other – and one that is based on desire - because you could be loyal through gritted teeth, but that you really want your woman the most, and she would always choose you, because we know what we're capable of with each other – you can't get it without experience. To have that freedom to trust each other, it's an awfully nice feeling, but you have to earn it.

Both symbolic and moral boundaries are activated to make non-vanilla cohere into a shared and meaningful category. Not only is vanilla bracketed off from non-vanilla, and non-vanilla qualified with ways of making it legible to vanilla norms, there are also internal politics to non-vanilla. There are right and wrong ways of practicing non-vanilla. This is particularly poignant in the case of consent within BDSM. “Safe, sane and consensual” has become a banner slogan in BDSM discourse, yet our participants point to the complexity of boundary work within and around it and are aware of how conversations on Darkside tend to disconnect consent from questions of desire, pleasure, and listening. Hanna, one of our Swedish participants, contemplates:

I think consent is a very interesting and very complex question. It manifests itself in any random male profile over 40 on Darkside writing “it’s of course consensual,” but the very wording assumes my consent before any desire has been realized. (...) There is something about the whole concept of consent that almost shifts the conversation away from, for example, pleasure, or listening, or community in sexuality. Which I think is sad. (...) You quite often see claims that the vanilla world should take after BDSM, you should become better at negotiating, better at consent and so on. And that is of course true in many ways. But it is also a question of how it’s done. It’s not enough to copy and paste these scales, which are also built into Darkside, where you have to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 if you like splashing not at all, moderately, or if it’s your lifestyle. It takes the focus away from what is happening in the moment between practitioners.

In general, discussions of consent have moved from a “no means no” (as an emphasis on the right not to be abused or violated) to a freely given, affirmative, enthusiastic “yes means yes” approach understood to accentuate active and engaged pleasurable sex (Albury, 2002; Friedman, 2008). Consent is also embraced as something provisional and revokable at any moment, and as requiring contextual or situational awareness, especially in BDSM circles (Bauer, 2014). Then again, the contractual nature of consent can be anything but sexy in that it values legal evidence over sexual experience and elusive desire (Novack, 2017). Swedish BDSM practicing Klara proposes:

I think [the idea of] good sex can sometimes be about dominants not really listening to the submissive, but doing what they think is best, if it ultimately results in a positive experience for the submissive. It is interesting how, for example, people write diary entries about their own sexual experiences along the lines of “I protested and I screamed ‘no’, and then he did it anyway, and it was so damn hot, it was so fantastic,” which is met with encouraging and supportive comments. While if the same story results in a bad feeling for the submissive, then the dominant is instead perceived as a perpetrator. So, discussions about consent often appear very clear and simple, but when you look at how consent is negotiated in practice, it becomes much more blurred.

Our participants highlight that while BDSM cultures are ground zero of consent negotiations, the symbolic and moral boundaries of consent as a constitutive value of liberated non-vanilla sex are not at all obvious. People’s sexual practices can involve things that they do not want, or do not know that they want. They may enjoy taking risks (such as showing up in someone’s office naked) or be turned on by a power dynamic that temporarily strips them of agency. Both include sidestepping explicit consent, moving from “safe, sane, and consensual” to “risk-aware consensual kink.”

National sexual imaginaries

In articulations of “liberated sex,” vernaculars of vanilla offer rhetorical coordinates for boundary work but also emerge from cultural and national sexual imaginaries (see Grigoropolous, 2022, Harviainen and Frank, 2018 on the continual stigmatization of

non-normative sex). Our participants' comments regarding "typical" Estonian, Finnish, or Swedish sexual attitudes bookend boundary statements that allow casting the sex they are having and expressing on the platforms as liberated. Articulating "liberated sex" necessitates a point of comparison (vanilla), just as articulations of sexual diversity and fluidity require postulating other forms of sexuality as rigid and fixed (cf. Ahmed, 2000: 84; Paasonen, 2018, 141). Yet, empirically, national imaginaries of vanilla hardly comprise monolithic categories.

On the one hand, our participants quite often cast typical national sex lives and attitudes as conservative, introverted, or dull. These statements indicate that the ones having liberated sex and those who are not are separated by a symbolic, if not a moral boundary. Consider this description of "typical good Swedish sex" by Klara:

It's of course heterosexual, and then it's equal. Sex which can be separated from life in general. There are very clear sexual scripts about what is included, what comes first, with foreplay and some kind of main act and so on. Good sex is consensual, but it's not explicitly consensual, it's about just being able to read and understand each other in a wordless way. Because as soon as you have to be verbal about sex, there is a norm that says that everything that's exciting and romantic and interesting disappears. These are some examples of what good sex is. It should also be a little innovative and a little exciting, and you can definitely do things that border on BDSM, but it shouldn't be too much, because then it suddenly becomes threatening and perverse.

On the other hand, our participants tend to make references to the presumed shared sexual "relaxedness" or "peasant pragmatism"² that they attribute to their national cultures, in particular when comparing them to the Puritan tightness associated with Anglophone cultures. Teemu argues that:

... Finns have a certain kind of relaxedness about sex, and treat sex as ordinary. You can kind of just take other people's sexuality with humor instead of condemning it. But many of them will still have really moral ... really, they may have really rigid ideas about their own sexuality. So, they may tolerate others and be like "heh heh heh, he's such a perv" and "what the hell, let them do what they want to do," but then they themselves may implement their own sexuality in a very traditional and rigid way.

Annina chimes in, explicitly evoking the notion of sexual norms:

if you compare [Finland] to like the US and consider that Instagram and Facebook and those American social media tighten and ban the expression of and discussions on sexuality more and more. So, in this respect, I feel that in Finland we're quite open and accepting, and sexuality is mundane for many. But on the other hand, it may be pretty narrow, I think. There's a certain norm that's familiar to many and people act according to it, and within those limits it's pretty open. But if we go a little beyond the norm then that's a different thing altogether, then we're maybe not that tolerant and open (...) I see that it's a certain

heteronormative, monogamous relationship sex that's the thing, or an acceptable and desirable ideal.

Evident in Klara's, Teemu's, and Annina's statements is complex situational boundary work where the sexually liberated "us" is constituted as standing apart from their imagined compatriots, who are then further set apart from members of other, non-Nordic cultures. Further, these national imaginaries of sex include boundary dynamics hinging on whether one's non-vanilla, liberal attitudes or lack thereof are directed at one's own or other people's sexual practices. The boundary work of "liberated sex" is a dynamic dance of what one does and desires but also how tolerant one is of what others do and desire, how that is perceived to relate to what one's compatriots are imagined to do and desire, to imaginaries of even broader, even narrower cultural norms of "good sex," linked to an ambiguous Puritanism of the Anglo-phone cultures. This allows ignoring contradictions by making it possible to always bound one's own sexuality as liberated in at least one of the many ways.

The sexual platforms our participants use also play an important role in how their preferred forms of sex become bounded off from and defined against national imaginaries. Here too multiple, situational, and occasionally contradictory boundary dynamics can be identified. Our participants describe the platform users as more liberated than average Estonians, Finns, and Swedes, yet also push against such simple differentiations: for some, the platforms simply make visible extant sexual diversity. This could be framed as a techno-skeptical sentiment that casts the platform as "a surface scratch" of the sex that people are having or as a more techno-enthusiastic take where platforms are positioned as affording the pleasure of discovering the unexpected kinkiness of one's compatriots. Many Finnish participants identify Alastonsuomi as a site for "pervs" through which they can find, talk to, and support each other. Estonian swingers Toomas and Pille share a similar sentiment about *Libertine.Center*, the Estonian non-monogamy site:

I mean the surprise ... people using this site are so open-minded, friendly, courageous, active ... Estonians are typically very modest, but we've found that once an Estonian gets over their initial shyness they go all in. The first time we went to Cap D'Agde in France we were asked where we're from, and people were like, "oh, Estonia, we have had a few Estonians here, and they are completely wild, they do things we don't even have words for in French!" Can you believe that? Estonians! On this site, we are constantly surprised at how open-minded people are.

Finally, it is important to point out that even though our participants tend to position themselves personally as liberated across all these intersecting boundaries, and more often than not articulated a positively valued "us" group against hetero-normative, mono-normative, body-normative, trans-, and kink-phobic national vanilla imaginaries, they were mindful as to the generalizations involved.

Limits of liberation

Our participants invoke further boundary work within sexual liberation by positioning it through comparative contextualization as a work-in-progress—one Estonian interviewee defines himself as “definitely liberal compared to other men my age,” while another says that he wants to change his on-platform label to “Libertine” but feels it would be false advertising, and he needs to gain more experience to justify the title. However, these limitations of liberation are also articulated by referring to particular discourses of diversity (Weeks, 2017) that interviewees’ struggle to understand or entirely accept. As described by the Finnish Anna:

Let’s say that I’m pretty open-minded. Previously I considered myself very liberal but during my sexual therapy studies I realized that, oopsy daisy [laughs], I’ve been pretty liberal, but I’ve had difficulties understanding non-binary gender for example, or the need for young people to change their gender, or this strong outcry of homosexual families and rainbow families and the drumming up of their rights to the point where ... the rights of heterosexuals kind of become trampled on. ... Let’s say that I’m constantly becoming more liberal ... [but] I’m still a little underdeveloped for these [laughs], much freer themes.

Finally, our participants also probe the limitations of liberation within their sexual subcultures or communities. While there are many queer libertines among them, it appears that—alongside and layered into the explicit boundary pertaining to vanilla—heteronormativity remains a tacit value. It was quite common for women (both single users and as part of couple accounts) to be portrayed on platforms and in sexual social situations as more sexually fluid and open to female sexual play partners, while the men’s heterosexuality was often explicitly emphasized. Some questioned the genuineness of this. Kaspar, an Estonian single man who has sex with couples and groups, commented:

I think it’s a bit weird that it’s such a liberated platform and everyone’s so, well ... I’m surprised that I’ve had a couple of experiences where someone claims to be straight on the platform, but then when you talk, they seem to have quite a bit of bi-interest, and I wonder why they’re so, to some extent they’re still, I don’t know what they’re afraid of, or why they don’t want to say it openly. Some of the couples do put down “bi” for both of them. I’m not a homophobe, but it’s easier to arrange play, when everything is clear.

Chris Haywood (2022, 117) describes a similar hierarchy in UK sex clubs where even on bi-nights bi-sex is only visible between women, whereas sexual activity between men is relegated to the invisible and liminal spaces of darkrooms. Jaan, an Estonian bi-curious man in a non-monogamous relationship, offers more insight on the heteronormativity of ostensibly liberated spaces that both he and Kaspar inhabit:

I have in the last, say, half a year, maybe a year, I have just discovered this bi interest in myself, but I have not added it to our profile yet, because ... and probably a lot of people might feel the same way, that other people’s opinions matter. This is very Estonian. Estonia is

this small, tiny, lovely country, but you say you're a bi man and some people will refuse to meet you, so I guess people don't add it to their profile, but will try to introduce the idea of it in the beginning of the date.

These self- and us-group-critical caveats (e.g., of the heteronormativity within spaces that otherwise pride themselves on being “non-vanilla,” and thus liberal across many other boundaries between presumed normativity and liberation) were offered freely, without being prompted by the research team. We interpret this conditional and contextual articulation of liberation as highlighting the importance of *variability/diversity* discussed above, but now in the sense of directionality (towards self, vs towards others). Earlier, we argued that sexual liberation is seen as co-constitutive with the kind of sex one enjoys. We now suggest that liberated sex is articulated as hinging on aspirational, if not necessarily accomplished capacities to shift from “the admitted *fact*” to “an accepted *norm* of sexual diversity” (Weeks, 2017). In other words, our participants equate sexual liberation with enacting a “benign sexual variability” (Rubin, 1989) even if they are not certain they can always live up to it.

Conclusion: The goodness and badness of sex

When thinking through and defining sex they enjoy and prefer, our participants did not perform a full inversion of Rubin's schema. Rather, their articulations entail the dislodging of vanilla (as monogamous, non-kinky, and heteronormative) from the top of the sexual value pyramid. It is possible to read Rubin's mapping of sexual hierarchy as pointing to not only the narrowness of the terrain of “good sex” but also to how “goodness” associated with vanilla as devoid of unruly fantasies or elements of play ultimately presents something of a void—a blank nothingness—in ways questioning its attraction as a point of sexual self-identification (Paasonen, 2018, 4-5).

Arguing against sexual morality, Rubin (1989: 283) suggests that acts should be judged “by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of pleasures they provide. Whether sex acts are gay or straight coupled or in groups, naked or in underwear, commercial or free, with or without video should not be ethical concerns.” This maps onto the ethos emergent in how our participants articulate “liberated sex” as independent from particular preferences (non-monogamy, BDSM, fetishism, and exhibitionism) and as rather revolving around *willingness, variability/diversity* in both one's own practices and tolerance of others, *self-reflexivity* regarding the role of sex in one's life and sense of self, and the challenges involved in becoming sexually liberated so as to fully embrace diversity (Weeks, 2017). However, there are limitations to this liberation, which our participants are often aware of. While the sex they enjoy and sex they describe as liberated is explicitly unfixated from many aspects of what they consider vanilla-normativity variously attributed to Anglophone Puritans, one's own compatriots, or oneself, it is still often tacitly heteronormative (in particular in terms of sexual activity between men). Further, the ability to embrace and enact sexual diversity that our participants' articulations of liberated sex is predicated on, is admittedly aspirational, and not yet always lived.

Rubin (1989: 283) goes on to argue for the centrality of detaching ethical considerations from shaming and one's personal likes from normative value judgments, suggesting that it "is just as objectionable to insist that everyone should be lesbian, non-monogamous, or kinky, as to believe that everyone should be heterosexual, married, or vanilla." Our participants' definitions of "liberated sex" emerge through boundary work contra vanilla imaginaries, which are usually not explicitly posed as moral ones. However, there is explicit valorization of non-vanilla as allowing for more complex and interesting sexual subjecthood that amounts to an evaluative hierarchy. Non-vanilla is sometimes described as concurrently and co-constitutively liberated and transformative, which opens it up to questions of whether non-vanilla is validated as liberating by making it legible (by claiming the practices as profoundly transformative) for the vanilla world.

The conceptual division of non/vanilla emerging in the interviews then helps to construct both a sexual hierarchy and a sexual binary to where it may be difficult to draw one, given the range of practices that can be included in both flexible categories. Rather than being seen as a (tasteless, bland, and un-hot) monolith necessary for outlining its (savory, spicy, hot) counterpart, vanilla—like sexual tastes more generally—can be considered as involving gradations, nuances, and experimentations wherein, say, elements of power-play intersect with missionary sex, where role play may spice up relationships marked with familiarity, and where a water sports session may liven up an evening at home. The boundaries of the sexual norms are elastic and on the move. It then follows that boundary work reliant on non/vanilla works to create imaginary clarity out of "benign sexual variation" (Rubin, 1989) as a means of making visible, and thus giving shape to sexual tastes excluded from, or fitting ill within heteronormative conceptions of good sex. When framed by our participants in terms of a "vanilla world," the non-vanilla comes to mark spaces of sexual relating that hold value as enclaves for the similarly minded—not least so on sexual platforms designed to support this.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: this work was supported by the Östersjöstiftelsen (1035-3.1.1-2019) and Academy of Finland (327391).

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Notes

1. “Perv” (*pervo*) was introduced in 1990s academia as Finnish translation for “queer” in a similar move of recuperating a term used to classify and injure (Juvonen, 1993; Kekki, 2006; Rossi and Sudenkaarre, 2021).
2. A set of vague ideas linked to the sauna tradition and open-air summer festivities prevalent in Northern cultures that presumedly bring with them looser historic attitudes towards nudity and sex, so that the region becomes marked apart from international contexts.

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