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Unfolding intimate media cultures
An inquiry into young people's intimacies
on social networking sites

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PREFACE – VOORWOORD

Toen ik zes jaar geleden de keuze maakte om een werkcollege Film- en Televisiestudies te volgen gedurende mijn opleiding derde Bachelor Communicatiewetenschappen, had ik wellicht nooit kunnen inschatten wat dit verder allemaal zou bepalen. De voeling met academische literatuur, het uitdenken van inspirerende onderzoeksvragen die sterk in relatie staan tot maatschappij en cultuur, zijn vaardigheden die in dit werkcollege werden aangescherpt. Het in praktijk brengen van de aangeleerde vaardigheden, zou mij voor de komende jaren niet meer loslaten. Alle dank gaat dan ook uit naar de twee titularissen van dit werkcollege, mijn promotor, Prof. Dr. Sofie van Bauwel, en Dr. Frederik Dhaenens. Zonder hun enthousiasme, stimulans en hun sterke geloof in mijn engagement, had dit proefschrift nooit tot stand gekomen. Mijn promotor, Sofie, heeft in de weg naar dit proefschrift een bijzonder grote rol gespeeld, die moeilijk neer te schrijven valt. Als ik dan toch een poging tot beschrijving zou mogen doen, dan komt 'het creëren' spontaan naar boven; enthousiasme, visie, ruimte, geloof, passie, vrijheid, vragen, betrokkenheid, engagement en bovenal kritische zin. Ook Frederik stond mee aan de wieg van dit doctoraat. Ik heb vanaf het prille begin kunnen rekenen op onnoemelijk veel feedback, hulp en opbouwende kritiek. Dit werkstuk was zonder Frederik niet hetzelfde, het is mee gegroeid met zijn passie voor theorie, academisch onderzoek, onderwijs en de universiteit. Bedankt voor dit alles.

Graag wil ik de leden van mijn doctoraatsbegeleidingscommissie

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Sander De Ridder
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INTRODUCTION

Intimate troubles: Entering the zone

Zone 1 –

For a few consecutive days in January 2013, newspapers in Belgium reported on young girls who were depicted as 'whores' on the social networking site (SNS) Facebook (Remy, 2013). Several of these Facebook pages, administrated anonymously, referred to Belgium cities where these girls were located as 'Antwerpse hoeren' (in English: 'Antwerp whores') and 'Zelzaatse hoertjes' (in English: 'Whores from Zelzate'). These pictures showed girls' 'sexy' self-representations in photographs taken with their smartphones, also known as selfies. Those self-representations were taken out of their initial contexts, without the girls' knowledge and were often accompanied by rude, sexist, and downright misogynistic comments. Eventually, a considerable number of these offenders were prosecuted, as numerous voices in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgian society were worried about this form of cyber bullying (Remy, 2013), especially when taking into account the recent international example of the Canadian girl Amanda Todd (Inz, 2012), who committed suicide after being bullied for her nude pictures circulating on the Internet. Somehow, these girls were punished for creating these self-representations for being *too slutty* or for making them *too public*. The balance between creating a sexy picture that may lead to possible social and romantic successes in popular social media places and being too

public and too slutty seems to demand careful management. The pillory of these girls relates to particular gendered and heterosexist values, which is hardly something new, but what about the specific mediated contexts of creating self-representations through pictures taken with a smartphone and circulating them on SNSs? How do these contexts contribute to the particular sense-making processes that are condemning these girls' self-representations as being too public or too slutty?

Zone 2 –

In February 2013, newspapers in Belgium reported on the Facebook page 'Gênante seksmomenten' (in English: 'Embarrassing sex moments') (Theun & Dehandshutter, 2013). On this Facebook page, people are able to share embarrassing and funny stories about sexual experiences anonymously, because the administrators of the page only post these stories when they have received them by e-mail. Sensoa, an organisation specialising in sexual health in Flanders, worried about the intent of the page, as the majority of active members were teenagers (Theun & Dehandschutter, 2013). In some cases, young teens shared their most intimate troubles, insecurities and fears related to sexuality on this page, but they were laughed at by the audience. Commentators on this Facebook page did not want to provide serious help but were looking for fun, spectacle and imagination. Seeing the remediation of these young people's most intimate stories in this particular SNS context as entertaining must have been painful for some of the young people who were searching for real answers. However, should we see the acts of these Facebook commenters as proof that teenagers are becoming more antisocial? Obviously, the mediated context of the Facebook page relates to the conflict in genre, this genre conflict related to interpreting this page as a form of entertainment and spectacle by some people, versus a place where you could ask serious advice about sexual troubles and insecurities by others; there is an obvious misunderstanding among the intentions of the authors of these intimate stories, the administrators of the Facebook page, and the audiences' interpretations.

Zone 3 –

In May 2013, Belgium's well-known marketer and 'Internet specialist' Clo Willaerts, published *Altijd Naakt. Manage Je Identiteit Online* (in English: 'Always nude. Manage your online identity') (Willaerts, 2013). Willaerts argues that because social media websites' business models have changed to using real names instead of anonymous nicknames, we should continuously manage our reputations and identities online. The book provides numerous alarming examples of people who have lost control over their online life, such as being fired because of compromising pictures that have gone public in social media. When arguing for online identity management, Willaerts makes numerous claims not only about how people (an also young people in particular) should behave online to manage the possible risks, but also to convert those risks into opportunities the Internet has to offer. However, Willaerts fails to see her arguments have little to do with how people live their identities in their everyday life. Rather, her arguments are based on how dominant players in the social media market define online sociality. How do ideas of these expert voices in culture and society determine societies' fears about what young people are doing online? Moreover, as young people spend so much time on social media, could these expert voices affect young people's ideas and opinions about how to live intimate socialities related to the use of social media in not so neutral ways?

These three zones are examples of concerns that are central to this dissertation. They are all part of a particular dynamic I will explore further and refer to as *unfolding intimate media cultures*.

Modern transformations: Youth, intimacy and social media

The three zones mentioned above are examples of transformations taking place in the realms of young people's intimate life-worlds related to the use of social media and SNSs in particular. These transformations

are giving rise to numerous conflicts in culture and society that are referred to by sociologist Ken Plummer (2003) as 'intimate troubles'. The transformations of intimacy in the West have only relatively recently gained significant attention in the social and cultural sciences because, as argued by Steven Seidman (2013), numerous studies on gender and sexuality were fuelled by the politics of non-heterosexuality, while wider intimate practices are not often considered. However, to achieve a deeper understanding of young people's intimate troubles in current Western youth cultures related to their social media use, it is necessary to take their sexual and gender practices into account, while understanding young people's courtships practices, how young people begin, maintain and end intimate relationships, and exploring how youths make sense of desires. Modern evolutions such as increased time-space distanciations (Giddens, 1994, p. 181) are made possible by media technologies. In combination with processes such as globalisation, the growth of information and knowledge about intimacy and sexuality (Weeks, 2007) and the informalisation of manners and emotions (Wouters, 2007), intimacy, which used to be reserved for our most private spheres (Plummer, 1995, 2003), has increasingly become a public dialogue. Other than blurring the boundaries between the public and private spheres of people's sexuality, gender, relationships and desires, eminent scholars in the social and cultural sciences have argued the democratisation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992), the individualisation of intimacy (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), the liquidity of love (Bauman, 2003) and the commodification of intimacy (Illouz, 2007). Although these scholars make different arguments and conclusions about the consequences of these changes – some are more utopian, while others are rather dystopian – these publications clarify how the social and cultural organisation of intimacy in the everyday lives of people in contemporary Western societies are at the heart of a significant shift. Moreover, digital communications technologies, such as social media, have an important role within these processes of change, as argued in a number of recent publications (D. Chambers, 2013; Jamieson, 2013; Schwarz, 2010, 2011; Storey & McDonald, forthcoming; Turkle, 2011).

Young teenagers' life experiences today are seen as being at the heart of these transformative processes in technology and media, personal relationships and intimacy (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Geldens, Lincoln, & Hodkinson, 2011; Johansson, 2007). However, a transformation of intimacy related to youth cultures is far from a linear process, rather one of continuous struggle (for example also Nayak & Kehily, 2008), as noted by Thomas Johansson:

> Today, young people find themselves in a field of tension between stricter sexual morals and sexual liberation, between gender repression and sexual equality, between giving shape to new types of sexual patterns and falling into traditional social forms (2007, p. 102).

Within this dissertation, I will focus on the social and cultural patterns related to young people's intimacies in their everyday lives in which social media are omnipresent. Taking a sociology of youth culture approach implies departing from what young people have to say, instead of being guided by 'adult anxieties' (Ito, et al., 2010). However, the current understandings of young people as individualised, at risk and more sexualised than ever before are primary contexts with which to frame people's practices and experiences of intimacy (Attwood, 2009; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Hodkinson, 2007). Specifically related to young people's Internet and social media use, culture and society make sense of young people's practices in a limiting discursive binary of risks versus opportunities (Livingstone, 2013; Pascoe, 2011; Ringrose, 2011), which has obvious consequences for young people's sense making of their own practices in and around their use of the Internet and social media. Anxieties about young people's media use are not so new (Ruddock, 2013; Sefton-Green, 2006), especially in relation to intimacy, sexuality and media (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). However, the large scale, everyday basis and strategic appropriation of media tools when (young) people use SNSs (Baym & boyd, 2012, p. 321) have become an integral part of young people's life-worlds. Even more so than one-to-many forms of mass communication, social media are deeply implicated into the social and cultural organisation of young people's most inti-

mate socialities (Ito, et al., 2010). Social media are transforming numerous lived realities into symbolic contents (Hepp, 2012), reorganising people as (imagined) audiences into complex networked structures (Livingstone, 2012), and reorganising places as media spaces (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004). Moreover, these places are operated by media institutions, which are organising non-profit lived realities into databased structures and monetising people's activities and connections within these media (Marwick, 2013; van Dijck, 2013).[1] Young people's intimate socialities as lived through social media give rise to numerous media-related practices of individuals, audiences and social media institutions, which this dissertation will explore. I will focus on interpretations of the knowledge, normativity, strategies and tactics produced within these media practices (Couldry, 2010a; Schatzki, 2001) and draw on the wider cultural and societal contexts to understand the unfolding intimate media cultures as a way of sense making about gender, sexuality, relationships and desires as lived through social media in contemporary Western youth cultures.

The particular focus of this dissertation is on how young people deal with these unfolding intimate media cultures in relation to their use of popular SNSs, and wider transformations of intimacy in culture and society. My primary concern is with the intimate politics in youth cultures, media literacy and media and democracy (Ruddock, 2013). I will question how intimate politics are lived through the everyday social media environments of these young people and how we can think about an intimate citizenship (Plummer, 1995, 2003) in these online spaces of extended territory that offer numerous participatory possibilities. The intimate citizenship project problematizes fixed notions of intimate identities and depends on maximising people's choices of what they can do and what they want to do with their gender, bodies, relationships, identities and eroticisms in public and private realms. An intimate citizenship by choice questions the repetitive heteronormative constructions of gender, sexuality, relationships and desires as forms of 'pure citizenship' in culture and society (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Further, the intimate citizenship project allows people to be accountable

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1   Note that I will refer to space further in this dissertation as an abstract idea, while I will refer to place as more concrete places in which humans may have a presence.

and responsible for their own self-produced intimacies (Butler, 2005). This dissertation is concerned with young people's *democratic voicing possibilities* in social media cultures (Thumim, 2012) through exploring the possibilities they have to tell their own *intimate stories* in popular social media places. I am concerned with young people's voices as *intimate stories*, seeing voice as a political process of expression. Voices are useful tools to give an account of one's own intimacies; however it is useful to explore what particular values are given to particular intimate voices by exploring the processes that obstruct voicing possibilities and finding out which voices are silenced (Couldry, 2010b, p. 3). I will make these matters more explicit in particular research aims and positions.

Research aims and positions

> Let us face this dilemma directly. There is nothing in our genes that tells us how to create and execute those activities we summarize under the term "communication." If we are to engage in this activity —writing an essay, making a film, entertaining an audience, imparting information and advice—we must discover models in our culture that tell us how this particular miracle is achieved.
> James W. Carey[2]

> Media and cultural studies as a field need to attend more to the causes and mechanism of change, focusing the analytical lens on the dynamics of systems, not just on structural oppositions within them.
> John Hartley[3]

This dissertation is situated within media, communication and cultural studies (Couldry, 2012; Hammer & Kellner, 2009), centralising the role of media as part of the everyday lives of people (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013): 'This theory combines a focus on the mundane day-to-day events and practices that make up ordinary life with increased attention to

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2   See Carey (1988, p. 14)

3   See Hartley (2012, p. 22)

the ways in which media are structuring and restructuring a number of aspects of our lives' (Longhurst, 2007, p. 35). My theoretical and empirical explorations are concerned with *how the media mediate* in relation to broader questions of democracy, culture, society, communication, identity, inequality, power, history and culture (Livingstone, 2009; Silverstone, 2002). Therefore, social media will not be conceptualised as 'new media', but as an integral part of *the media* (Couldry, 2009), as newer media forms always relate to the practices and cultures of older media forms (Grusin & Bolter, 1998). Media are only considered meaningful in relation to people's media practices, which are the things people do with, and or around, media. This *non-media-centric approach* (Moores, 2012; Morley, 2009) centralises social practices and the role of media in their construction. A non-media-centric approach does not depart from media (e.g. specific devices or representations) themselves but centralises practices as media-related; this is why I centralise intimate storytelling practices as particular starting points for my theoretical and empirical explorations. Following Nick Couldry's (2010a, 2012) approach to media practices, I do not start by looking at 'industries (e.g. political economy approach), texts (e.g. studies on representation) or audiences (e.g. the production of meaning through media texts)' (2010a, p. 37). Similarly, Brian Longhurst (2007) argues that media studies should 'pay attention to micro-powers in a range of social situations and that we need to take apart what is meant by the media, to explore the powers of different media in particular contexts' (Ibid. p. 42).

As suggested by the examples at the very beginning of this introduction (e.g. zone 1, 2 and 3), young people's intimate stories that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships and desires, as practices in and around social media, will be explored. I will provide a systematic conceptualisation to reduce the theoretical complexity of these phenomena by constructing a theoretical model that explains communicative interactions in social media places, offering a relative generality to explore intimate media cultures *as lived* (Williams, 1958/2002) through the everyday lives of young people.

Understanding young people's intimate socialities as media practices

of intimate storytelling, I want to offer an analytical model of how digital means for communicative interaction and wider media cultures have become significant in the social and cultural organisation of young people's sexualities, genders, relationships and desires. My aim is to offer insights into the transformation of intimacy in the everyday lives of young people, who live with ubiquitous digital media applications.

My focus on media is an understanding of how media are meaningfully shaping and co-constructing intimacy through specific practices, such as creating a particular software platform that demands the user to fill in a closed inventory, and the cultural meanings, evolutions and normalisations that are related to the presence of social media in young people's life-worlds (van Dijck, 2013). Currently, media and cultural studies have produced rather *functionalist accounts* that focus on structural oppositions within young people's self-representations of gender, sexuality, relationships and desires; self-representational practices are understood as either incorporating or resisting dominant gender and sexual ideologies. There is an obvious stagnation in media, cultural and queer studies in which heteronormative ideologies are understood within an incorporation or resistance binary through only looking at texts, representations and significations (Ruffolo, 2009). As I will explore further in the theoretical chapters, self-representation is just one of the many meaningful social media practices. Further, in the everyday lived realties of people, the power of media is much more complex than these limiting views on ideology related to gender and sexuality (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). These functionalist perspectives do not say anything about the particular dynamics of change because of the presence of media and the wider dynamics of media systems in culture and society (Hartley, 2012).

Nevertheless, ideological dynamics remain important in this dissertation but rely on non-functionalist and non-structuralist understandings of young people's intimacies as lived through media. Therefore, I focus on the *political dynamics* of intimacy as lived through social media. To clarify political dynamics, I refer to Chantal Mouffe's definition

of 'the dimensions of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9). Popular social media are politically relevant places, which I believe need to allow a plurality of hegemonic powers that provide possibilities for conflict and 'contestation of cultural narratives that can take place without domination' (Benhabib, 2002, p. 8). The hegemonic contestations in young people's intimate stories as media-related practices are explored in the works of social constructionist theorists of gender and sexuality (Seidman, 2010; Weeks, 2010), critical poststructuralist theorisings (Butler, 1990/2006; Foucault, 1976/1998) and queer theory (S. A. Chambers & Carver, 2008; Jagose, 1996; Warner, 1991). Therefore, I am integrating social sciences research with postmodernist and poststructuralist theorisings, feminism and critical theory. These integrations are central to my particular understandings of the social and cultural organisation of everyday life, such as those found in the theoretical perspectives of reflexive sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Heaphy, 2007), critical humanism (Plummer, 2001) and social postmodernism (Seidman & Nicholson, 1995).

The mediatisation of culture and society

The three zones I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction are examples of transformations taking place in the realms of young people's intimate life-worlds. This dissertation focuses on many-to-many communication interactions[4] that give meaning to intimacy in youth cultures to explore these transformations. Media are technological means for producing, circulating and receiving communication (Couldry, 2012), consisting of artefacts or devices for communication, a range of activities and practices and the social arrangements or organisational forms to develop those devices and practices (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006, p. 2). I will refer to both concepts of mediation and mediatisation in this

4   Social media are also important tools for one-to-one communication through personal messages or chatting. Although I acknowledge this, these forms of communication will be less central to this dissertation.

dissertation to understand how the media acts as an anchor in young people's intimate storytelling practices in everyday life.

The study of 'mediation' refers to the non-linear complexities of transforming lived realities into the circulation of symbols in social life. As noted by Roger Silverstone, mediation processes are uneven, dialectical processes, involving institutional media of communication (2002, p. 762). Mediation does not focus directly on media content but explores the wider social and cultural processes that the media constitute (Martín-Barbero, 1993). Recent theoretical contributions in media and communication studies focus on more linear processes of mediatisation rather than mediation (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hepp, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013; Krotz, 2009). While mediation denotes a whole range of processes that remain important to explore, the transformation of intimacy in young people's life-worlds, in relation to the use of social media, benefits from exploring its relation to wider processes of social change, which is where the concept of mediatisation becomes useful, as explained by Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp:

> Mediatization reflects how the overall consequences of multiple processes of mediation have changed with the emergence of different kinds of media. Even so, the concept of ''mediation'' continues to describe a fundamental moment in the development of communication as symbolic interaction: its passing through technologically-based infrastructures of transmission and distribution ("media"). By contrast, "mediatization" refers more specifically to the role of particular media in emergent processes of socio cultural change (2013, p. 197).

The mediatisation of young people's intimacies explores the role of particular media in processes of social and cultural change, in which mediatisation is equally important and related to other meta-processes that I have mentioned before, such as for example the democratisation, individualisation and sexualisation of intimacy.

Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is organised as follows: I start by exploring how we can theoretically understand the role of social media in the social and cultural organisation of young people's intimacies as lived in everyday life. Three theoretical chapters are introduced, which are summarised in a theoretical model found at the end of theoretical chapter two (see Figure 1). This theoretical model explores significant processes (representation, subjectivity, participation and technology), actors (audiences and media institutions), and practices (self-representation, software design, opportunity structures for participation, and appropriation). The theoretical model aims to explain the complexities behind the different media-related practices – the things people do in relation to SNSs that give meaning to intimacy – and expands to explain media culture in relation to a wider positioning in culture and society.

Theoretical chapter one starts with some defining keywords and introduces research related to young people, social media, gender, sexuality, relationships and desires in the fields of youth studies, cultural studies, gender studies, media and communication studies. The chapter introduces four significant processes (representation, subjectivity, participation and technology) of importance to understand intimacy in social media, relying on earlier research, while explaining some limitations and criticisms. Chapter one ends with an introduction of my own positionality for the chapters that follow. Theoretical chapter two introduces the foundations of what I mean by intimate storytelling related to the politics of gender, sexuality and practice theory as a way of interpreting these intimate stories. Theoretical chapter two also introduces audiences and media institutions as actors involved in significant media practices when telling intimate stories on SNSs. Theoretical chapter three explores the 'bigger picture' and focuses on mediatisation processes by explaining the unfolding intimate media cultures that are becoming increasingly important in young people's intimate life-worlds. This final theoretical chapter provides insights not only into how media culture, of SNSs in particular, may become powerful by interweaving

with people's media-related practices, but also shows how culture and society makes sense about young people, intimacy and social media. Last, I end with some reflections on ethics, emancipatory politics and intimate citizenships for living an intimate life with and in social media.

The second part of this dissertation consists of five empirical chapters, which are published papers or revised papers resubmitted to peer-reviewed academic journals. These chapters are produced in the context of the research project 'The Online Stage: Youth and Heteronormativity, Self-Representation and Identity Construction in Online Communication' (2010-2014), financed by the Special Research Fund (BOF), Ghent University. Introduced in a methodological chapter, these empirical papers focus on youths' intimate stories, as media-related practices, in the context of popular SNS use in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. These chapters explore the social and cultural organisation of gender, sexuality, relationships and desires as intimate interactions in popular social media places. The focus of these explorations is on SNSs, which are appropriated on a large-scale by Northern Belgium teenagers. In addition to communicative interactions, the chapters focus on the experiences of intimacy in and around these popular social media places, exploring the production of knowledge, normativity, strategies, tactics and inequalities. Therefore, the empirical chapters make use of a wide range of qualitative communication research methodologies (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011): participatory observation, focus groups research and contextual data such as documents and expert interviewing. The empirical materials can be consulted in the attached appendixes on the CD-R that accompanies this dissertation.

The conclusion reflects on how we can understand the changing (or continuing) nature of young people's intimacies in relation to the omnipresence of social media in their everyday lives, while exploring some limitations of my practice-based mediatisation approach.

The cited references in the theoretical and empirical chapters of this dissertation, can be consulted in the references section at the end.

KEYWORDS:
Youth, Intimacy and Social Media

This first theoretical chapter of the theory, introduces significant social and cultural processes related to youth, social media and intimacy. I will start with situating social media and social networking sites (SNSs) related to debates in society and academia on young people's genders, sexualities, desires and relationships. Further, I will make critical notes to current academic research dealing with young people's intimacies in digital communications media. Ending with the introduction of my own positionality, this chapter opens up new pathways on young people's intimacies living with social media, which will be further explored in theoretical chapters two and three.

Situating social media, youth, intimacy and society

> No one is in control, that is the major source of contemporary fear.
> Zygmunt Bauman[1]

Social media platforms are usually contextualised within the Web 2.0 phenomenon, which is primarily a business-oriented evolution. Web 2.0, as a concept, must be seen as no more than a rebranding of the Internet

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1   I took this specific quote from the website of The Guardian (2011) in which Bauman explains in a video interview his views on contemporary dynamics of power and control in society.

after the dotcom bust in the 1990s. Tim O'Reilly (2005), the well-known founder of the keyword Web 2.0, defines the main characteristic as a move from *content* to *Internet sociality*, in which 'sharing' is the main constitutive activity (John, 2012). Social media are the software, applications, websites, technologies and devices on which the Web 2.0 phenomenon is built (Han, 2011, pp. 4-5). Although various types of social media exist,[2] I will focus on social networking sites (SNSs). 'These sites primarily promote interpersonal contact, whether between individuals or groups; they forge personal, professional or geographical connections and encourage weak ties (van Dijck, 2013a, p. 8). Relying on a number of technological processes, SNSs are built around digital code, networked structures, interactivity, hypertextuality, automation and databases (Miller, 2011). Although SNSs have only become culturally significant relatively recently, their evolution has been rapid and continuous. For example, Nicolle B. Ellison and danah boyd (2013) noticed how SNSs are becoming less profile centred and more focused on 'news aggregation' in which 'media streams' are of primary importance. Moreover, Ellison and boyd expect SNSs 'will continue to evolve' (Ibid.p.169). Social media are prominent features of the digitisation of media, which have transformed the ontology of what has been termed 'mass communication', that is, a shift from one-to-many to many-to-many communication, significantly; 'Using media means creating as well as receiving, with user control extending far beyond selecting ready-made, mass-produced content' (Livingstone, 2008, p. 394). SNSs converge a range of activities that used to be separate in earlier genres of computer-mediated communication such as e-mail, instant messaging, and blogging (Ellison & boyd, 2013). Further, SNSs displaced forms of computer mediated-communication, such as the creation of personal home pages, and re-mediated a wide range of communication practices, such as face-to-face interaction (Grusin & Bolter, 1998; Livingstone, 2008). As social media platforms have replaced the one-to-many model of mass communication by producers and consumers being one and the same person, conceptu-

2   José van Dijck (2013, p. 8) distinguishes four types of social media: social networking sites (such as Facebook and Netlog), sites for user-generated content (such as YouTube), trading and marketing sites (such as Amazon), and play and game sites (such as FarmVille).

alised as 'prosumers' (Bruns, 2008), Nick Couldry (2009) asked if 'the media' has any future to understand phenomena such as the Web 2.0. He argues how, despite these evolutions in the ontology of mass communication, the social construction of the media 'will continue to frame not only the activities of media institutions, large and small, but also the actions of individuals that operate across the producer–consumer division' (Ibid. p. 448). As I will explore further in chapter two of this dissertation, media industries and audiences remain primary actors for understanding the role of SNSs in everyday life; there is no significant power shift in which audiences have become more powerful than the media industries (Schäfer, 2011), but rather an intensified struggle between media institutions' strategies and audiences' appropriations (de Certeau, 1984/2003; De Ridder, 2013a; Manovich, 2009). Although the specific digital, converged and networked features of social media are of primary importance, I find it analytically useful to think of SNSs as part of the media, next to other forms of 'reciprocal media communication' and 'produced media communication' (Hepp, 2012; J. B. Thompson, 1995). Moreover, SNSs have become an integral and important part of popular media culture (Ellison & boyd, 2013), which I will explore more in-depth in theoretical chapter three.

From the onset, SNSs have been framed as significant aspects of youth culture; they were quickly adopted as 'essential for being cool at school' (boyd, 2007, p. 119). Currently in 2012 in Europe, SNSs are mostly used by people aged 16 to 24 (86 percent reportedly participated in the last three months before the survey). The use of SNSs decreases as the age group gets older; among 25 to 34 year-olds, 69 percent participated in SNSs (European Commission, 2012). SNSs are mainly adopted by young people as tools for styling and managing identities, peer-to-peer relations and social status (Liu, 2007; Mallan, 2009). Further, young people make sense of their surrounding cultures and wider public life when interacting with social media (boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2008). Particularly, these networked Internet tools allow to transgress everyday life spaces, creating (empowered) opportunities for a far reaching mobility beyond the control of adults (Gray, 2009). However, SNSs

are also heavily peer controlled normative spaces; profiles are usually constructed around what types of self-representations are socially acceptable in the particular online context (Baym, 2010; boyd, 2007).

Digital communications media gave rise to a myriad of social and cultural practices, which are, for an important part, friendship-driven. However, young people also begin, maintain and end romantic relationships in the mediated contexts of SNSs (Gershon, 2010a; Ito, et al., 2010). Social media are spaces in which people pronounce desire and give meaning to their sexual, gendered and courtship practices. Internet sociality has fuelled and even steered a transformation of intimacy in young people's lives; 'while we usually think of these intimacy practices as individual and private, teen romance and dating rituals take place, in many ways, publicly and collectively' (Ito, et al., 2010, p. 120). Moreover, as these intimacies are lived in 'immersive' experiences within the realm of the 'virtual', questions of who is in control of young people's online intimacies have become central in culture and society. For young people, online spaces and SNSs are about finding a private space within their own peer groups, out of the sight of parents and educators. In addition, they offer a wide transgression of the boundaries provided by 'safe spaces' such as the home or school, which is 'unknown, unfamiliar, and sometimes scary to adults' (Ito, et al., 2010, p. 117). In society, social media, youth and intimacy are for the most part being described and understood in terms of risk avoidance, but also in terms of how to convert those risks into opportunities (Livingstone, 2013; Pascoe, 2011; Ringrose, 2011b). Although debates around young people, sex and the media have always concentrated on the dangers of 'being sexualised', arguing how children and teenagers are becoming dupes of an increased commodification spurred by the media (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004), the responsibility of how to deal with such threats is now much more framed as being situated by the youngsters *themselves*. In so called individualised risk societies and cultures (Beck, 1992), which are primary features of late modern societies, intimacies are processes of self-actualisation which we need to control ourselves (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Moral panics about young people losing control over

their intimacies related to social media are regularly depicted in the media, which result in concern by the public, authorities and opinion-makers, usually ending in social and cultural changes (K. Thompson, 1998, p. 8). Shayla Thiel-Stern (2009) examined how English language newspapers reported on girls using the popular SNS MySpace. She concludes how panics constructed girlhood as a helplessness period in need for more control. Moreover, SNSs technologies and MySpace in particular were blamed for a wide range of cultural problems. In general, those discourses failed to understand what young people are doing with media can be risky, but the risks young people face with media also provides opportunities for emancipation, acquiring knowledge trough communication, creativity and imagination (Hasinoff, 2013; Livingstone, 2008; Ringrose, 2011b). Framing young people's intimacies within the framework of risk avoidance gave rise to numerous educational policies and media literacies; 'risk aversion implies a conscious rational actor who should be trained up into risk aversion as part of making safe choices in a dangerous world' (Ringrose, 2011b, p. 122).

Within societies, young people's intimacies related to their digital media use have become meaningful mainly as risky. Although opportunities for young people are recognised, participation in social media has mainly become a matter of self-control and risk avoidance. The risks versus opportunities discourses when making sense of young people's self-mediated intimacies is – as I will discuss later in-depth in chapter three – how cultural understandings of the media have the power to shape a broad range of young people's media-related practices when telling their own intimate stories on SNSs.

Keywords in academic research on youth, intimacy and social media

Even though Internet sociality is a relatively recent phenomenon, this part of the thesis will introduce a considerable number of studies that

have focused on the subject of Internet socially related to youths genders, sexualities, relationships and desires. Exploring young people's online behaviours related to sexuality, gender, relationships and desire has received significant attention from a wide range of fields and theoretical perspectives. Research ensued from the societal moral panic to gain more control over how young people live their intimacies online, by providing some rational and nuanced explanations on the 'real' risks of online sociality and intimacy (e.g. Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). When looking for research on young people and sexuality in an online context, the majority of research is situated within the fields of development psychology, public health and paediatrics.[3] Although not specifically focusing on sexuality, gender and desire, the EU Kids online project needs to be mentioned here. Directed by Sonia Livingstone, the project organised detailed European face-to-face surveys in the homes of 25000 European children and parents. This empirically driven approach provided insights into how certain risks, relate to possible harm, exploring possible vulnerabilities of young people online. The project focused on refuting societal myths about children's online risks (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011).

While most research is situated within theories of psychological development concerned with the influence of 'interactive technologies' on the construction of a '*coherent* and *stable* identity [emphasis added]' (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011, p. 31), I will focus on discussing social constructionist insights on youth, intimacy, digital media and SNSs in particular.[4] The social and cultural organisation of young people's intimacies in digital media has been explored in various disciplines. Most research is situated at the crossroads of youth studies, cultural studies, gender studies, media and communication studies. Although social constructionism as a theory of gender and sexuality comes in many forms (Brickell, 2006), most enquiries report critically on oppression and systematic injustices built into self-representations of girls espe-

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3   I'm referring to research I found in the 'Web of Knowledge' database of Thomas Reuters, using the keywords 'youth', 'sex*', and 'online.'

4   Therefore, it should be noted that when discussing academic insights on youth, intimacy and social media, my overview will not be exhaustive.

cially. Therefore, self-representations of gender, sexuality and desire are seen as the effects of inequalities between men and women and institutionalised heterosexuality (Ingraham, 2005; Jackson, 2005). Such insights make it clear that processes of *subjectivity* regarding how young people become constituted as intimate subjects are of primary importance. This thinking about intimacy takes, although not always directly referring to it, Michel Foucault's (1975/1995, 1976/1998) 'genealogy of the subject' for granted. Foucault provided insights into how the subject is historically constituted in discursive practices of what he called 'disciplinary regimes', among which the system of sexuality. Moreover, Foucault's approach has been at the basis of cultural studies' 'subject-of-language' approach to identity. As Stuart Hall (2000, p. 19) defines identities as, 'Points of temporary attachment to the subject position which discursive practices construct for us', these subject positions are attached to identities through continuous and never finished moments of identification; identifications are constructed around shared characteristics with persons, groups or ideals. Closely connected to subjectivity, the process of *representation* is crucial to understand the coherences of intimate self-representational practices of young people. Subject positions responsible for the self-represented systematic injustices become meaningful through the process of representation. The particular 'cultural systems of representation' (S. Hall, 1997b) are coherent regimes in which intimacy should fit to be 'intelligible' in a given situation (Butler, 1990/2006). Next to subjectivity and representation, insights rely on the processes of *technology* and *participation* to explain the specificity and the context of digital media in which these intimacies are shaped. Technologies are seen as structures that command specific actions (Van Loon, 2008). One could say that, the networked structure of Internet technology (Castells, 1996/2010) is seen as the primary technological feature complicating intimate interactions in SNSs. However, most of the findings emphasise that technology does not determine young people's specific actions. Therefore, the concept of affordances is used to explain the relation between the 'technological artefact' and specific 'human practices' (Hutchby, 2001); SNSs technologies frame but do

not determine young people's practices (Livingstone, 2008); SNSs technologies rely on people's specific appropriations to become meaningful. The networked structure of Internet technology is directly related to the participatory opportunities people have to share their intimate self-representations. The participatory opportunities inherent to social media allow people to use their own voice to tell stories (Couldry, 2010b). Insights into these voicing possibilities clarify how young people's intimate self-representations in social media debouch into a continuous democratic and ideological struggle to tell their own stories, which, as Nico Carpentier notes, should be seen as deeply-rooted within the process of participation (2011a).

The majority of research is concerned with how young girls' self-representations are subjected to the wider sexualisation of culture (Attwood, 2009; Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010; McNair, 2013). Rosalind Gill (2007) claims that through 'sexualized self-presentations', we can understand 'internalisation processes.' The internalisation of female subjects into disciplinary regimes performed on the body and personality is how young people take part in their own sexualisation and objectification, referred to as self-objectification. Brian McNair (2013) defines sexualisation as follows:

> Much of culture, including sexual culture, is designed to prelude or accompany the moment of objectification, and the sexual contacts and intimacies which might follow from it; to celebrate and heighten those moments, as in pop songs and video, or the romantic comedy in cinema. Cultural sexualisation includes those moments, alongside all the other articulations and reflections of human sexuality contained in the variety of cultural forms to which we are daily exposed.
> And it is the case, oft noted, that sexual liberalisation has proceeded in the advanced capitalist world since the 1950s, mainstream culture has become more overtly and directly sexual (2013, p. 12).

These particular processes of subjectivity are recognised in girls' self-representations on SNSs by a substantial number of studies (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; Dobson, 2011, 2012; Gómez,

2010, 2011; P. C. Hall, West, & McIntyre, 2012; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Magnuson & Dundes, 2008; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Ringrose, 2011a; Siibak, 2009; Siibak & Hernwall, 2011; Sveningsson, 2009; Tortajada-Giménez, Araüna-Baró, & Martínez, 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012; Willem, Araüna, Crescenzi, & Tortajada, 2012). Moreover, sexualisation and objectification are currently accompanied by subjectification, which is the central feature of a post-feminist culture (McRobbie, 2008). Objectification and subjectification are defined by Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) as follows:

> A postfeminist sensibility includes the notion that femininity is increasingly figured as a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a 'makeover paradigm'; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked 'resexualization' of women's bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference
> (2011, p. 4).

Because of these post-feminist complexities, researchers' explanations of girls' self-representations in SNSs conflict with the interpretation of this self-objectification. While some see objectification always as a bad thing; most research is nuanced, while others emphasise agency, pleasures and subversions when young people make sense of sexuality in SNSs (van Doorn, 2009). However, research concerned with objectification points out how gendered stereotypes and heterosexual norms are reproduced or even reinforced in online contexts. Girls focus on fragmented bodies, hotness and sexiness, cultivating a masculine gaze of desire (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008; Tortajada-Giménez, et al., 2013; Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012). The way young boys construct masculinity on SNSs is, in comparison to girls, understudied. However, Andra Siibak (2010) and Adriana M. Manago (2013) observed the objectification of men; boys are equally attempting to represent themselves

as 'sexy'. Further, romanticism and the representations of desire and relationships follow the stereotypical heterosexualised patterns of gender displays (Tortajada, Willem, Crescenzi, Araüna, & Tellado, 2012). Moreover, in contrast to representations of romantic intimacy between boys and girls, non-heterosexual intimacy is symbolically annihilated in young people's self-representations on popular SNSs (De Ridder, 2012; Sveningsson, 2007). Some research focuses specifically on the possibilities for democratic participation in digital media related to gender, sexuality and relationships. For example, more empowered positions of young woman are mentioned because of online media (Harris, 2008). In addition, a number of studies argue the new voicing possibilities for gay and lesbian youth to come out of invisibility, which is argued to support the coming out process (Gray, 2009; Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2008). Possibilities for remediating coming out stories in social media, such as coming out on YouTube, have become a particular popular genre that allows gay youths to perform specific forms of rhetorical action for a large audience, transgressing the heterosexual boundaries in culture and society (Alexander & Losh, 2010).

Reflections on how we should interpret these intimate self-representations, Siibak and Patrick Hernwall (2011, p. 65) refer to contextualise them within 'peer culture' as one of the 'main sources of inspiration for the youth in their creation or writing of the online body-self.' They argue how the shaping of these peer cultures takes place on SNSs; power structures are continuously constructed and negotiated in social media, which is essential to understand the cultural productions of young people. In relation to gender, sexuality, relationships and desire, Siibak and Hernwall (2011) emphasise the importance of heteronormative power structures, which are strongly maintained, yet sometimes subverted and resisted at the same time. Further, the majority of research contextualises young people's intimate self-representations in popular culture; consumer cultures such as advertising, celebrity culture and feminine fashion (Bailey, et al., 2013; Dobson, 2011, 2012; Ringrose, 2011a). For example, Cilia Willem and colleagues (2012) showed how female Spanish teenagers produce self-erotic images using aesthetic resources found in

advertising, while Siibak (2010, p. 419) proposed that in environments like SNSs, self-representations of masculinity 'can be characterised by a tension between traditional hegemonic forms of white masculinity and the newer more androgynous forms of masculinity introduced by the consumer culture.' According to Jane Bailey and colleagues (2013, p. 107), 'mediatized celebrity culture [sic]' teaches girls that they must be attractive, have a boyfriend and be 'a player in the party scene' to be socially successful with their SNSs profiles. Much of these criticisms rely on Marxist theories and Frankfurter School reasoning (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002), which argue young people's self-representations are commodified, related to the wider process of commercialisation (Featherstone, 2007). The commodification of intimacy and sexuality related to social media use, means that young people behave as sexual objects to be desirable to others, which brings us back to the importance of the sexualisation of culture and society as contexts for understanding intimacy on SNSs. Also, the process of sexualisation must be seen as related to commercialisation. However, as Ringrose (2011a, p. 104) highlighted; commodification can be used ironically, thereby illustrating experimentation with sexual identity. In sum, much research argues that young people's intimate self-representations are continuously struggling with the ideological dominations over their genders, sexualities and desires, simultaneously reproducing and resisting these powers.

Discussion: Critical notes and unanswered questions

After introducing some of the main conclusions developed on young people's intimacies in digital media and SNSs in particular, I will continue discussing these results by focusing on how media are deeply intertwined with the social and cultural organisation of everyday lives. The existing body of knowledge discussed above offers many valuable insights on young people, intimacy and social media, which have introduced four processes of significant importance to understand the social

and cultural organisation of young people's sexualities, genders, relationships and desires in social media; these processes are subjectivity, representation, technology and participation. However, I would like to highlight some remaining unanswered questions. First, the – mostly limiting – structural oppositions and discursive frames that earlier research has exposed within self-representations of young people's intimacies see media as no more than incorporating or resisting particular ideologies, while it ignores people's practices (Couldry, 2003), media power and the dynamic systems of change (Hartley, 2012). Further, earlier research ignores the power of media cultures in society, to what I will refer to as 'media ideologies' (Gershon, 2010a; Marwick, 2013) in theoretical chapter three of this dissertation. Second, the aforementioned research acknowledges the importance of technological affordances and participatory opportunities, but does not theorise them sufficiently; it ignores how technology is a material structure that becomes meaningful in social media platforms and software designs, produced by designers working for media institutions (Beer, 2009; van Dijck, 2009, 2013a). In sum, the limited understandings of media cultures and connected powers of the media have produced *functionalist* accounts on young people's intimate media cultures; discussions on young people's intimacies are very often situated within essentialist questions on how young people produce intimacy within a given discursive ideology, instead of reflecting on how intimacy becomes meaningful for young people themselves, taking into account the particular mediated and mediatised contexts. This needs some further explanation, which I will provide in the following sections.

Incorporating or resisting mass culture?

Sexualisation, post-feminism, popular media culture and commercialisation are all important aspects of contemporary Western cultures, which are relevant for making sense of young people's intimacies in social media. Following on from Marxist theorising, mentioned earlier

in relation to commodification theory, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944/2002), as prominent figures of the Frankfurt School, have been particularly important in showing how culture is a product of a cultural industry. Consequently, the dominant ideologies produced by the cultural industry, have become increasingly intertwined with the subjectivities we rely on to produce our own identities, as being reflected in the self-representations of young people in social media. Cultural studies have been important in explaining how people's identifications with popular culture have become related to our identities in more nuanced ways; audiences in particular are active players through negotiating with the products of the cultural industry, or in developing tactics to make those products their own, instead of being blindly dominated by the cultural industries (Fiske, 1989/2010; S. Hall, 1973/2006). Combining Frankfurter School reasoning and cultural studies, Douglas Kellner (1995, p. 3) argued that media culture should be seen as inducing 'individuals to identify with dominant social and political ideologies, positions and representations', while at the same time 'audiences may resist the dominant meanings and messages, create their own readings and appropriations of mass-produced culture and use their culture as resources to empower themselves and invent their own meanings, identities, and forms of life'. Current research on teenagers' self-produced intimacies in social media relies on such reflections of mass-produced culture, which have either been incorporated in young people's self-representations or resisted. In this way, Marxist materialist feminism (Jackson, 2001), post-feminism (Gill, 2007) and heteronormative criticisms (Gómez, 2010) are opposed to post-structuralist queer perspectives on gender and sexuality (Jagose, 1996), which focus on performativity and subversive pleasures that resist heteronormativity (Butler, 1990/2006; Gómez, 2011; van Doorn, 2009).

Although research on young people's intimacies in social media is much more nuanced than divided between arguing whether objectification is problematic or celebrating resistance, the conclusions are usually constructed within how young people incorporate ideology, but sometimes also resist. This incorporation/resistance paradigm has al-

ready been criticised in sociology and media studies[5] mainly in so called 'second-wave' audiences' research that focuses on media use as a social and cultural practice (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), in feminist media studies (Fenton, 2000) and in the study of gay and lesbian identities in the media (De Ridder, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2011). The incorporation/resistance paradigm in media studies usually results in conflicting results, arguments and conclusions, without making clear the power of media. Related to research on youth, intimacy and social media, I believe there are two important reasons for these conflicting results. First, in contemporary Western youth cultures, intimacy is profoundly complex. It could be said that sexuality 'defines the totality of our gendered lifestyle, embodied, post-class identity' because sexuality in late modernity is not only about sexual identity, but has come to define 'the core of the self' (Rahman & Jackson, 2010, p. 149). Young people produce their sexualities in a reflexive way, with a heightened self-awareness about the plasticity of genders, sexualities, relationships and desires (Giddens, 1992). Young people reiterate normative intimacies from adult life, but also give new meanings to the pervasive sex-gender orders; moreover, young people are heavily informed by mass-produced popular culture. To sum up, contradiction and complexity are the primary features of gender, youth and culture in current life-worlds (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). These current cultural complexities in youth cultures have informed much academic and societal debate on agency, especially related to young girls (Duits & van Zoonen, 2007, 2013), but they have also significantly informed insights on how young people produce their intimacies in social media, without saying anything particular about the mediated and mediatised contexts of these intimacies. A way out of the incorporation/resistance paradigm is a better understanding of how young people as audiences make sense of their intimate practices in SNSs. Second, *media culture is not equal to a mass culture*, as defined by Kellner (1995) almost twenty years ago.

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5   However, the incorporation/resistance paradigm has also been an important critique on queer theory itself, and is thus not limited to media studies. David Ruffolo (2009), author of Post-Queer Politics, talks about the queer/heteronormative dyad as problematic, which is also pointed out by Max H. Kirsh (2000), who critiques queer theory for not being able to deliver social change.

Kellner's insights were heavily related to one-to-many media like television and film. However, the incorporation/resistance paradigm does not address the technological, societal and cultural evolutions of technological communications media like SNSs. As Ellison and boyd (2013, p. 166) argued, 'Thus, two studies of a particular site that produce different findings may not be "contradictory" – they may actually have examined what are in essence two different socio-technical contexts.' I agree with Andreas Hepp (2012, p. 8), who argued media culture is 'omnipresent, but not a mass culture.' Media culture is *not only* about making sense of representations produced by the media (Couldry, 2012) or making sense of mass produced standardised popular culture, media culture is much more complex. Media culture is lived in everyday life-worlds (Williams, 1958/2002). Therefore, as Hepp notes, media are constitutive of the realities in which we live:

> Comprehending media culture is a much more complex enterprise, since our construction of reality is increasingly effected through media. This is what we have to address, and it has always proved a major challenge to define what media culture really is (2012, p. 11).

Thomas Johansson (2007), author of *The Transformation of Sexuality: Gender and Identity in Contemporary Youth Culture*, presents a rigorous study on Swedish youth's intimacies. In the epilogue, Johansson highlights the importance of media to understand young people's sexualities. Further, he argues how 'the media sphere' is often ignored, but should be seen as inextricably intertwined with young people's 'identity-formation' and everyday intimacies. Not considering 'the media sphere' is, according to Johannson, 'an effect of the difficulties inherent in detecting and studying media influences' (Ibid. p. 111). I believe exploring media cultures can be a way to understand how media like SNSs become powerful and interwoven in young people's intimate practices. How media cultures and technologies like SNSs shape or co-construct intimate interactions, is necessary to understand the role of media in the intimate lives of young people. The importance of media cultures brings us to a second critical note on the current state of research on

teenagers' genders, sexualities and desires in social media: where are 'the media'? Media cultures are shaped through a myriad of media practices of audiences and media institutions. Media cultures presume a complex mediation of the transformation of intimacy as lived reality, into symbolic content.

Where are 'the media'?

> On this view, we need media and communication research to understand how the media mediate, for the same reason that we need linguistics to understand how language mediates, economics to understand how money mediates, literature to understand how narratives and myths mediate, and consumption studies to understand material goods mediate.
>
> Sonia Livingstone [6]

If young people's intimate socialities are lived and made sense of in digital media like SNSs with such intensity, as made clear in the aforementioned research, why are reflections on how this transforms intimacy so scarce? Insights limit themselves to mentioning briefly technological affordances and networked complexities, but do not claim SNSs as part of the media. Intimacy in social media is seen as a form of mass communication and/or interpersonal communication, but does not recognise these practices as complex 'hybrid forms of mediated communication' (Livingstone, 2009). My argument here is that current research on young people's intimacies in digital media lacks ontological and epistemological reflections on what it means to live gender, sexuality and desire with social media; what does it mean to be a mediated subject in SNSs, what are people doing with these media and how can we understand it? When young people upload pictures, update their statuses, or interact on social media, research describes these practices as 'performances', 'self-presentations' or 'self-representations.' The tendency for the

6   See Livingstone (2009, p. 5)

language of self-representation to be conflated and inconsistent does not take SNSs seriously as media. Nancy Thumim (2012) recently defined self-representation in digital culture as 'the mediation of a textual object.' Indeed, the notion of representation is crucial here: 'When someone produces a self-representation they produce a bounded text, however fleeting and ephemeral that text might be' (Ibid. p. 6). Research on SNSs usually puts central symbolic interactionism; the work of Erving Goffman (1959) on the presentation of the self (Papacharissi, 2011). While Goffman's insights are significant for understanding interaction in everyday life – and thus in SNSs – the theory of symbolic interactionism is not sufficient to capture how technological communications media transform performances to interactions that are produced using artefacts, such as software platforms, created by media institutions. Consequently, self-representations have particular symbolic politics and powers that should be considered.[7]

Making conclusions about how young people live their intimacies in these spaces without exposing the transformative mediation process as context, involves the risk of reproducing what Couldry has defined as 'the myth of the mediated centre' (Couldry, 2003); we cannot access a representative realist account of young people's intimacies by analysing them in social media (Hartley, 2012). Social media do not represent young people's performances in a 'natural way', but are co-constructing these performances meanings. In this way, media becomes naturalised, and what young people are doing is not recognised as a form of media production and authorship (Hasinoff, 2013). Consequently, relating young people's practices in social media to the work of cultural and creative digital media industries is important; media institutions should be considered important actors within the representations of intimacy in social media (De Ridder, 2013a, 2013b). Scholarship on SNSs is too focused on the 'user' as being all-powerful in media. As argued by David Beer (2008), scholarship on SNSs should take into account the politics and economies of social media industries:

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7   The practice of self-representation should not be linked exclusively to digital communications media. Thumim (2012) claimed self-representation 'has a history in scholarship as long as the history of the idea of the self' (p. 6). Thumim explores self-representation in television, but also in museums. As Hartley (2012, p. 21) put it, before the era of interactivity and SNSs, 'People were also able to self-represent, achieve productivity, and the like, but media and cultural studies found this hard to see' (p. 21).

We are overlooking the software and concrete infrastructures, the capitalist organisations, the marketing and advertising rhetoric, the construction of these phenomena in various rhetorical agendas, the role of designers, metadata and algorithms, the role, access and conduct of third parties using SNS, amongst many other things (2008, p. 523).

Conclusion: Towards positionality

Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les conditions modernes de production s'annonce comme une immense accumulation de spectacles. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s'est éloigné dans une représentation.

The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.
>   Guy Debord[8]

This chapter introduced how society understands young people's intimacies in SNSs in terms of risk avoidance; based on the abovementioned argumentations, culture and society believes we have lost control over what teenagers are doing related to intimacy in social media. Within the fields of development and social psychology, much research has been conducted that refutes taken-for-granted myths about the dangers of being online and using social media. Youth studies, cultural studies, gender studies, media and communication studies mainly explore complexities related to the construction of online identities. As shown, four processes are of significance here: subjectivity, representation, technol-

8   The quote from Guy Debord originally in French is cited from an edition published by Gallimard (1967/2000); the English citation is a copy published by AK Press (1967/2005) .

ogy and participation. These four processes indicate how SNSs are built around material, social and cultural complexities, which are important to consider. These four processes will at the basis of my further explorations.

I have chosen the above quote from Guy Debord, not because I believe young people's intimacies are to be reduced to hyperreal simulations within their everyday lives (Baudrillard, 1983) that are somehow not grounded within the 'real' (but as often believed, within the 'virtual'), but the notions of 'spectacle' and 'representation' are significant to understand what young people are doing when they give meaning to intimacy in SNSs. Media and communication studies have not sufficiently defined digital media applications as being part of the media. Therefore, it would be useful to contextualise young people's activities as mediating textual objects. In this way, young people are considered as doing something more than presenting themselves, but producing media as authors. The construction of this (imagined) author as being present to understand what people are doing in social media, is important for the study of social media, and research in critical digital media literacies in particular (Das & Pavlíčková, 2013). Mediation processes are creating intensive flows of intimate stories; 'flows of production, circulation, interpretation or reception, and recirculation, as interpretations flow back into production or outwards into general social and cultural life' (Couldry, 2008, p. 380). This process also brings in the importance of performances, signs, aesthetics and objects when analysing young people's intimacies in social media (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Featherstone, 2007; Lash & Urry, 1994).

I have emphasised the importance of media cultures to understand the transformations and the particular social and cultural organisations of young people's intimate life-worlds. Media cultures will be explored in further depth in theoretical chapter three of this dissertation. To understand media cultures and transformative meta-processes, referred to as cultures of mediatisation (Hepp, 2012), we first need to expose the non-linear mediation process further; how does this transformation take place? What processes, actors and practices are significant

here? Chapter two will move away from focusing solely on significations, representations, and identifications, and will put forward media practices as situated within particular places. The turn to practice theory is primarily aimed at coming closer to young people's everyday life-worlds in which digital media applications are somehow always present in their social and cultural environments and wider society. SNSs are part of routinized everyday habits, bounded not only in texts, but also in bodily actions (Moores, 2012). SNSs are closely connected to young people's 'peer-based affective communities in school' (Ringrose, 2011b, p. 134); they are used for peer group acceptance (Livingstone, 2008), and for entertainment, passing time and social voyeurism (boyd, 2007). Young people's intimacies flow within streams of power, and digital media applications have become an important part of that.

ACTORS:
Intimate Storytelling as a Media-Related Practice

A stronger media theory to reflect on how the ubiquitous social media applications are transforming young people's intimate practices would be useful (Hasinoff, 2013). Therefore, this chapter's main goal is to expose the complexity of mediation through technological communications media. Here, I will define young people's intimate socialities as media practices of intimate storytelling, situated within media spaces. This is a necessary step to explore how media culture is important in the wider social and cultural organisation of intimacy in mediatised youth cultures. The goal of this chapter is to build an analytical model[9] (see Figure 1 at the end of this chapter), which defines particular practices of the meaningful things people do with SNSs. These practices unfold around the processes of subjectivity, representation, technology and participation, in articulation with two essential actors necessary for media practices to come into existence: audiences and media institutions.

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9   An earlier version of this analytical model has been published elsewhere (see De Ridder, 2013b).

Intimate storytelling: transformations in discourse, power and control

The exploration of how young people live their intimacies on SNSs, should not start with seeing intimacies as isolated within social media spheres. Gender, sexuality, relationships and desires are lived within the realms of social life-worlds, which are not necessarily mediated through technological communications media. Consequently, when we are interested in the transformation of intimacy because of the omnipresence of social media, we need to start from a particular social practice, which also exists outside of mediation.[10] A social theory of how gender, sexuality, desire and relationships become meaningful in everyday life is necessary. Therefore, I rely on the interpretation of intimate stories. I will define intimate stories as embodied human actions that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships and desires. The prefix 'intimate' in my metaphorical use of 'intimate storytelling' is thus not to be misunderstood as a broad conceptualisation, which includes spheres such as friendships, family or feelings (e.g. Berlant, 2000). Other than being interested in mental entities such as beliefs and emotions, the focus is on knowledge, strategies and tactics that produce intimate stories (Schatzki, 2001). The focus on intimate storytelling is a particular way of interpreting intimacy, as close to the individual as an embodied human. Consequently, the focus on 'storytelling' is not to be situated within literary theory (e.g. the study of narratology in literature, film and fiction (Chatman, 1978; Fludernik, 2009), as there is no interest in the structures of these stories themselves as texts. I see my study of intimate stories as dynamic social actions, situated within history, power and culture (Ortner, 2006). Many studies on young people's intimacies in social media that I discussed in chapter one, interpret these productions as no more than texts, in which meaning is constructed through an endless flow of signs (Derrida, 1967/2003). This anti-humanist theorising that has argued 'the death of the subject' (Foucault, 1975/1995,

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10 I refer to mediation as through technological communications media. Intimate stories always need to be mediated somehow, as symbolic interactionists have taught us, for example, through a person's voice, bodily gestures, and so on.

1976/1998) is problematic, as it does not allow an individual to account for itself (Couldry, 2000). Moreover, it erases every moral and ethical question regarding responsibilities of produced intimate stories in social media (Butler, 2005). The focus on intimate storytelling acknowledges an individual self, without contextualising a person as outside of what Stuart Hall (2000, p. 18) described, relying on Jacques Derrida, as *différence*; selves and identities are subjected to the play of power, exclusion and 'othering'. This approach has been given different names in social and cultural theory, such as 'critical humanism' (Plummer, 2001), 'social postmodernism' (Seidman & Nicholson, 1995) and 'reflexive sociology' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Heaphy, 2007). The focus on human actions is a necessary revision of the method of media and cultural studies (S. Best & Kellner, 1991; Couldry, 2000), but also studies of sexuality. As a prominent scholar on sexuality, Jeffrey Weeks (2010, p. 152) noted, 'We have deconstructed the idea of sexuality. It is now time to start thinking afresh about individual needs and aspirations, and the wider social solidarities that can support them'.

Intimate storytelling has been developed in the sociology of Ken Plummer (1995). In his book *Telling Sexual Stories: Power change and Social Worlds*, Plummer explores sexual and intimate personal experiences. Plummer does not focus on what people say, but rather on the social and cultural processes involved in these stories. Intimate stories could be part of the processes of how people create a self-defining story of their sexual identities, developing a so called (auto)biographical life narrative (Giddens, 1994; Smith & Watson, 2010). However, this is not necessary, as intimate stories could also be meaningless to individuals; they do not necessarily have to be about personal experiences or personal identities. Intimate stories in SNSs, which come into being through the media practice of self-representation, are a good example thereof. As SNSs are about socialising, passing time and entertainment, certainly for young people (boyd, 2007), intimate stories as self-representations are often 'inadvertent' and 'banal.' Thumim (2012) argued, 'In order to participate in online socialising here, people must represent themselves. Thus self-representation is a condition of participation in this

online space' (Thumim, 2012, p. 138). However, intimate stories are always socially and culturally significant. No matter how small, banal and insignificant they may be to individuals, intimate stories flow in social and cultural life; therefore, they can be used to make sense of gender, sexuality, desire and relationships, which is how individuals develop their intimate identities; intimate stories endure as epistemologies (Hammack & Bertram, 2009).

Intimate storytelling is foremost a political process, as it gives people a voice (Couldry, 2010b). By political process, I mean 'the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9). With the concept of intimate storytelling as a political process, I recognise young people's agency and reflexivity to tell their own intimate stories within given pluralities of hegemonic powers. *The politics of intimate storytelling are the politics of gender and sexuality.* Intimate stories are ordered according to a strict and pervasive system of sex/gender/desire, which has been described as 'the heterosexual matrix.' This heterosexual matrix, theorised by Judith Butler (1990/2006), has to be understood as a framework of meaning through which to make sense of sex/gender/desire; 'The heterosexual matrix is nothing more, certainly nothing less, than an assemblage of norms that serves the particular end of producing subjects whose gender/sex/desire all cohere in certain ways' (Chambers, 2007, p. 663). The heterosexual matrix has been developed relying on lesbian feminists Adrienne Rich (1980/1993) and Monique Wittig (1992), who critiqued heterosexuality as a social and political structure that influences a range of institutions, ideologies and everyday life. Schooling is an example of such an institution in the lives of young people, in which sex and gender are strictly regulated, operating within the system of heterosexual ideology (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). The heterosexual matrix has become accompanied in social and cultural theory by the concept of heteronormativity, first coined by Michael Warner (1991), who is a literary queer theorist. However, heteronormativity has been adopted as a political concept to understand how heterosexuality functions as a norm, that

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is cultural, legal and institutional (Castro Varela, Dhawan, & Engel, 2011; Chambers & Carver, 2008). First, heteronormativity is structured around *beliefs* of a *presumed* heterosexual desire. It puts heterosexuality in opposition to homosexuality. Second, heteronormativity is a set of *rules* to conform hegemonic heterosexual standards, as for example externalised in the nuclear family. Third, it is a system of *binary gender*, regulating what counts as masculine and feminine performances (Chambers, 2007, p. 665). Heteronormativity is a complex set of norms which makes everyone a potential outsider at times, without one group explicitly claiming leadership. Moreover, heteronormativity constructs heterosexual marriage and many connected practices (Ingraham, 2008) as models of 'ideal intimacy', refuting the idea that this is not more 'than one sexual-intimate choice' (Seidman, 2010, p. 146). Heteronormativity defines our intimacies as having a particular authentic core, against which alternatives are judged.

The politics of heteronormativity are the politics of intimate storytelling. Hegemonic powers, adopted from the political theorist Antonio Gramsci (1978), are disciplining people's stories, but they are never total or complete. Therefore, I'm taking a particular standpoint on the ideological system of intimacy and the psychological depth power has over people (Ortner, 2006). Hegemony exerts moral leadership over another, creating 'taken-for-granted' common sense. However, hegemony is not the same as total domination, nor does it imply a functionalist cohesion to the workings of heteronormativity; it is a temporary project that can be challenged. Hegemony puts struggle centrally in the wider arena of cultural politics (Jones, 2006). The politics of intimate storytelling are about the makings and maintenances of heteronormativity, but also its contestations and transformations. Intimate stories could be a good starting point, as we can come to understand which particular voices remain silent and which stories are seen as deficient, and explore what processes may be behind this silencing or perceived inferiority of stories. For example, Plummer (1995) mentioned that shame may prevent an intimate story from being told, which is significant for understanding the stories of gay and lesbian youths (Sender, 2012). An intimate

story has to be intelligible to be recognised as such. Intimate stories cite the coherent system of sex/gender/desire repeatedly, which is the very essence of how heteronormative power works. Within deconstructivist reasoning, it is only within these citations and repetitions of the matrix that these naturalised, materialised and authentic models of intimacy can be exposed, what Butler (1990/2006) has defined as 'subversion'. In this way, the escape from this disciplinary regime is only to be found within the system itself. However, late modernity thinkers, who aim at reconstructing the personal life in social and cultural theory, argue that intimacy in contemporary Western societies has become democratised because of an increased institutional reflexivity in the systems of gender and sexuality (Giddens, 1992). This opens up the possibilities for a wide 'democratic voicing of difference' (Thumim, 2012, p. 125), pure relationships and intimacies. Recent studies in youth culture have, for example, argued how teenage boys redefine their masculinities through emotional bonding and interacting, leading to a 'declining significance of homophobia' (McCormack, 2012). These insights refer to a broad observation in current Western societies to a more inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009), or post-hegemonic masculinity (Beasley, 2008) Further, Kearny (2006) argued that through technological communications media, girls have 'reclaimed and reconfigured girlhood as a site for radical social, cultural and political agency' (Kearney, 2006).

It could be said that intimate stories are less restricted by pervasive discourses of gender, sex and desire in contemporary youth cultures. Foucault (1976/1998) argued that sexuality is controlled though a disciplinary regime, which is the very basis of how we become intimate subjects, an argument which Butler (1990/2006) developed further to argue intimacies outside of these disciplinary regimes – what she has called intelligibility – are not even socially and culturally recognised. Notwithstanding a clear democratisation, intimacy is also recognised by an intense insecurity and 'intimate battles' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). David V. Ruffolo (2009) made an important argument when he argued contemporary politics of sexuality are becoming less disciplined (referring to Foucault), but more controlled (referring to Deleuze). Ruffolo

argued that the transformed conditions of our global life-worlds, such as changes in knowledge, information, communication and access, are at the basis of control societies (K. Best, 2010). This non-disciplinary power is an important feature of the network society, transforming many areas of social life (Munro, 2000). Although Ruffolo did not refer to the Internet and social media, his arguments fit perfectly within how technological communications media are spaces in which intimate stories could be understood as controlled, rather than only being disciplined and limited by subjectivity. Foucault's disciplinary power, discussed in chapter one, is at the heart of the incorporation/resistance paradigm currently dominant in media and audiences studies, and therefore needs to be expanded (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Ruffolo (2009) described we can revise deconstructivist theories on gender, sexuality, relationships and desires that rely on the incorporation/resistance paradigm as 'post-queer politics':

> The ongoing shift from disciplinary societies (Foucault) to control societies (Deleuze) runs throughout the plateaus of this project and it serves as an important lens to articulate the current climate of neoliberal capitalism and globalization. This shift is central to post-queer politics because it highlights new ways for thinking about the relationship amongst bodies, identities, and culture. At the heart of such a movement are the processes in which life is becoming less individualized and more dividualized where the inefficiencies of disciplinary techniques/technologies turn into control mechanisms: it is not that control societies have replaced disciplinary societies but that they are involved in an ongoing negotiation (2009, p. 169).

In contemporary youth cultures, intimate stories are complex embodied human actions that flow within discourse, power and control. For an intimate storytelling that is diverse, open and democratic, practices and places need to be open for such continuous contestations (Mouffe, 2005). How SNSs become powerful and interwoven in intimate storytelling, will be discussed further in this chapter.

Intimate storytelling as media practices in media spaces

> We have moved from the limited, oral and face to face tales told
> throughout much of history in epic poems, songs, and narratives;
> through the development of a public print inscribing sexual stories in
> limited texts, first for the few and then for the 'masses'; and on to a
> contemporary late modern world where it seems that 'sexual stories'
> know no boundaries. Indeed, every invention – mass print, the camera,
> the film, the video, the record, the telephone, the computer,
> the 'virtual reality' machine – has helped, bit by bit, to provide a
> veritable erotopian landscape to millions of lives.
>
> Ken Plummer[11]

After defining the politics of intimate storytelling, this paper goes fur-
ther and develops insights into how intimacy could be understood in
relation to the media, and to SNSs in particular. The question that is
central here is how digital communications media and their particular
affordances, shape and structure intimate stories in particular ways.
Moreover, how are these media connected to symbolic and social capital
in the everyday lives of young people? As argued in chapter one, inti-
macy as lived with social media debouches in more complex practices
than analysing them as texts, which incorporate, or resist mass culture.
In this way, SNSs are treated as no more than intermediators instead of
transformative mediators (van Dijck, 2012; Van Loon, 2008). As SNSs
are part of the media, people do things with particular semiotic media
tools (writing a self-introductory texts on a SNSs profile, posting a pic-
ture, etc.) in those specific places when telling intimate stories. Those
media practices should, such as posting a picture, be seen as the very
'sources and carriers of meaning, language and normativity' (Schatzki,
2001). Media practices are routinized ways of body movements (Moores,
2005, 2012), they handle technological objects that 'mould' the social
life-worlds of people (Hepp, 2012; Reckwitz, 2002). Those body move-

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11 See Plummer (1995, p. 4)

ments become expressed in a number of discursive practices, of which media practices are a specific type. Media practices have specific symbolic powers. Sarah Pink (2012) recently defined practices as 'sets of human actions than can be associated with each other in some way and that can form a category of social analysis' (Pink, 2012, p. 16). Intimate storytelling as media practices rely on a social and cultural understanding of human activities people perform; 'it treats media as the open set of practices relating to, or oriented around, media' (Couldry, 2010a, p. 36). Combined with a theory of human actions, we need to contextualise media practices within specific places to understand the transformative potentials of digital media in everyday life; 'an approach that understands media and its offline rationalities through theories of practice and place can bring us to an understanding of how human, technological, political, representational and other processes become interwoven (Pink, 2012, p. 140). Media practices of intimate storytelling are the total nexus of embodied human actions that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships and desires, related to, or oriented around, media. In this way, different media practices become sutured on the action of intimate storytelling. The field of media practices then, is the very place to investigate the agency, meaning, knowledge, power and ethics of intimacy in social media. Practice theory is significant to the study of digital media and SNSs for three particular reasons; practice theory puts the material body central, takes material (e.g. technological) things into account, and last, exposes the orderings of practises. Further, I will situate the importance of media place.

Why media practice?

Practice theory puts the material body central. Online environments are often thought of as virtual cyberspaces that allow fluid identity experiments because of the absence of material bodies (Harrison, 2010; Turkle, 1996). Cyberspace has become an example of Descartes' Cartesianism, in which 'pure minds' are detached from bodies, leading to endless pos-

sibilities to live our genders, sexualities, desires and ethnicities (Boler, 2007). These utopian dreams have been criticised by cyber feminist thinkers (O'Brien, 1999), as users of digital media seem to rely heavily on stereotyped images and gendered authenticity in text-based computer mediated communication. Eventually 'the mutual shaping of gender and technology' has been described to argue how digital media places interact with socio-cultural and technological processes (Leurs, 2012; van Doorn, 2011; van Doorn, van Zoonen, & Wyatt, 2007). A practice based approach embraces an embodied understanding 'in the realization that the body is the meeting points both of mind and activity and of individual activity in the social manifold' (Schatzki, 2001, p. 17).

Practice theory takes material things into account. For media studies, technological 'things' and their attachments to humans are essential to understand (Reckwitz, 2002; Van Loon, 2008). Practice theory emphasises human relations with non-human entities, without creating dichotomies between human and non-human actants (Schatzki, 2001). Therefore, practice theory is different from post humanist thinking and cyborg metaphors[12] (Cooney, 2004; Haraway, 1991), but more similar to Bruno Latours' actor network theory (ANT) in which non-human entities have agency, voice and meaning (Latour, 2005). However, as I will discuss later in this chapter more in-depth, if we want to understand software technologies in SNSs platforms, the social constructionist approach of ANT is not sufficient to capture the economic and cultural interests of how these technologies are designed (De Ridder, 2013a; van Dijck, 2012). Non-human actors are powerful, but should be understood in continuous dialogue with human appropriations (Schäfer, 2011).

Practice theory puts central the ordering of practices. As practices are routinized, the social order is created through reproduction and citationality, but also through moments of breaking out (Reckwitz, 2002); practice theory offers a middle ground to domination and therefore oscillates between agency and structure. Practice theory could therefore be seen as intertwined with the hegemonic project in cultural politics

12   The cyborg metaphor, coined by Donna Haraway, is a particular way of describing a posthuman creature that exists in social reality and fiction. The cyborg metaphor explains how distinctions between humans and machines no longer make sense. Harraway embraces the cyborg as a way to liberate culture and society from sexism.

(Ortner, 2006). Practices constitute discourses, but they also regulate activities in social life, and may 'anchor' other human activities (Swidler, 2001). In this way, we can understand how media practices have an ordering role into intimate storytelling. Therefore, media practices may constitute to some degree how intimacy becomes meaningful, but also regulate intimate practices in social life. An example is the work of Ilana Gershon (2010a), who enquired into how breaking up romantic commitments using new media such as Facebook connected to young people's beliefs and social mores on the social practice of breaking up. Media practices therefore co-constitute the social and cultural understanding of everyday lives in non-linear and complex ways (Couldry, 2010a).

Why media place?

Places that are created by media have a double logic of 'encompassing both the kinds of spaces created by media, and the effects that existing spatial arrangements have on media forms as they materialise in everyday life' (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004, p. 2). Shaun Moores (2004, p. 1) referred to the 'doubling of space' to describe the capacity media have for the 'virtually instantaneous transmission of information across sometimes vast spatial distances'. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (2004, p. 2) developed the concept of 'MediaSpace', which at once defines the artefactual existence of media forms within social space, the links that media objects forge between spaces, and the (no less real) cultural visions of a physical space transcended by technology and emergent virtual pathways of communication. MediaSpace is a significant concept to understand how young people's everyday life spaces are transformed by media. For example, Mary L. Gray (2009) argued how it empowers rural gay and lesbian youth; 'LGBT-identifying [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender] rural young people use new media not to escape their surroundings but to expand their hometown' (Gray, 2009, p. 15). Digital media extends young people's everyday life spaces, which may empower

them, as Gray noted. Gay youth in rural areas do not have access to peers or information on LGBT related issues, but digital media can help to overcome this. SNSs are connected to offline places of which they are an extension; they have the power to add a layer of meaningfulness to offline places, such as, for example, on playgrounds at school. Obviously, the extension of offline places also has the potential to add complexities, making possible far reaching moments of control through intense surveillance (Andrejevic, 2006). By no means should we understand social media spaces as strictly divided between the offline and online (Postill, 2008).

Introducing actors when telling intimate stories in social media

This study to explore how media cultures of social media are central in the social and cultural organisation of young people's sexualities, genders, relationships and desires, started with defining four processes of significance. Based on previous research, chapter one identified representation, subjectivity, technology and participation and this chapter defined intimate storytelling as an embodied human action of media practices. This is a concrete interpretative methodology to grasp how intimacy becomes meaningful on the SNS profiles of teenagers. We should situate the social and cultural organisation of intimacy in SNSs, within media practices. To define the specific media practices involved in this process, we need a final step; therefore, the next section defines audiences and media institutions as two actors essential in the mediation process of telling intimate stories in SNSs. The articulation of processes and actors will allow us to understand the complexities behind media practices.

Actor audiences

We have been told audiences are dead in converged media cultures (Rosen, 2008), yet others see audiences appearing everywhere and nowhere at the same time (Bird, 2003). Audience studies have been high on the agenda in media and communication studies for the last fifty years. Although media industries, policy makers and scholars have been desperately seeking how to grasp these collectives since the beginnings of audience studies, current continuous technological innovations, changing media industries and non-linear networked connections have raised questions about the need for a true paradigm change.[13] However, it could be said that current cross-generational dialogues between audience studies' scholars struggle with finding coherence about what should change. However, there seems to be an agreement in the current literature that 'audience' as a concept and subject of research is inevitably deeply implicated to the sphere of media and communication studies, notwithstanding current far-reaching evolutions. Audiences have been known in ancient history under many other forms such as crowds, mobs, masses and publics (Butch, 2008), while the last decade has conceptualised 'the audience' as 'users' and 'networked publics.' Both concepts, users and networked publics, are particularly related to the Internet and social media. However, user, understood as a user of a technological artefact, is too narrow to be an alternative to the concept of audience, as Sonia Livingstone (2012) noted:

> But "user" lacks any necessary relation to the process of communication, and also it is difficult to conceive of users collectively (compare, audience, public), both of which are defining features of audiences (2012, p. 262).

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13 My inspiration for his paragraph comes from notes that I took during a workshop on 'audiences: a cross generational dialogue' in Brussels on the 11th of April 2012. Particularly, interesting readings of and exchanges with Sonia Livingstone, Kim Schrøder and Denis McQuail should be mentioned here.

More interesting, and particularly related to SNSs, is the concept of 'networked publics', defined by danah boyd (2011):

> Networked publics are publics that are restructured by networked technologies. As such, they are simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies (2) the imagined collective that emerge as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice. Networked publics serve many of the same functions as other types of publics – they allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes, and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family (2011, p. 39).

Although the concept of (networked) publics is becoming a popular term to describe a collective of people engaging with social media, I believe the concept of 'audiences' situates the use of social media within the rich history and insights developed in decades of audiences studies (Carpentier, 2011b; Thumim, 2012). Therefore, I will continue to use this term throughout the paper. For example, Livingstone remarked that the focuses of media and audiences studies should be the rearrangements of people 'afforded by the mediation of mobile phones or social networking or blogging'. However, the rearrangements of audiences of digital media are 'a continuation of rather than a radical break from earlier analysis in the rearrangements among people afforded by soap operas, talk shows or reality television' (Livingstone, 2012, p. 265). Therefore, the rich tradition and history of audience research when enquiring about digital media, remains significant (Carpentier, 2011b; Livingstone & Das, 2013; Thumim, 2012). Indeed, referring to Halls' (1973/2006) understanding of 'decoding' processes, Livingstone and Ranjana Das (2013) noted that researching the meanings and interpretations of audiences have not disappeared in times of social media:

> Once again, there is a pressing task: of countering implicit assumptions of the World Wide Web as a window on the world, of websites whose meaning can be straightforwardly stated by the researcher, of an online world that presents the same face to all comers, in which MySpace and Wikipedia and Second Life are inviolate objects of singular meaning, however diverse the uses to which they are put (2013).

Social media, and SNSs in particular, have not ended audiences practices, quite the contrary, there is an 'amplification of audience practice – a space for the display of taste and cultural knowledge – SNS are clearly an important part of the emerging audience landscape' (Couldry, 2011, p. 225). The social context of the audience and the social use of media is what we need to grasp if we want to understand how media reconfigure everyday lives, which is where the usefulness of practice theory, as a theory of social action, comes in. 'The audience' can be defined 'broadly as the domain of media-related practice outside production within specialist institutions' (Couldry, 2011, p. 215). However, media practices are not equal to audiences' practices; media practices are not always audiences' practices; some are practices of media institutions. If we think about significant media practices when telling intimate stories in SNSs, self-representation is the most obvious. I used Thumim's (2012) definition in chapter one; self-representation is the action of mediating a textual object. Self-representation is a media practice of what young audiences are doing in SNSs. Therefore, young audiences use SNSs platforms built through software designs. Designing software is a media practice of media institutions connected to telling intimate stories in SNSs, which illustrates how both actors, audiences and media institutions are important to understand intimate storytelling in SNSs; intimate stories do not necessarily have to be audiences' practices. I will elaborate further on the practices of SNSs as media institutions (creating platforms, designing software), but for now it should be clear that *self-representation* is a media practice of audiences in SNSs.

Returning to the opening question on audiences, is there a necessity of a paradigm change in audience studies? Although I have argued that 'the audience' as a concept should be maintained, major changes in the object of study do justify a paradigm shift if we want to take a longer view to the study of audiences.[14] Summarised by sociologists Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998), changes in modernity, such as the separation of time and space (Giddens, 1994; J. B. Thompson, 1995), are indebted to new technologies and the ubiquitousness of media

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14   Again, I'm referring here to the cross-generational dialogue on European audiences I took part in.

in everyday life (Longhurst, 2007), which reorganised audiences from simple audiences (e.g. attending theatre) to masses (e.g. watching television), and finally to diffused audiences. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) define current audience-experiences as follows:

> The essential feature of this audience-experience is that, in contemporary society, everyone becomes an audience all the time. Being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor even an everyday event. Rather it is constitutive of everyday life. This is not to claim that simple or mass audiences no longer exist. Quite the contrary. These experiences are as common as ever, but they take place against the background of the diffused audience (1998, pp. 68-69).

Abercrombie and Longhurst introduced the Spectacle/Performance paradigm to research diffused audiences and argued how current human activity is constructed as a performance intertwined with the processes of spectacle and narcissism. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) defined spectacle and narcissism as follows:

> The people, objects and events in the world cannot simply be taken for granted but have to be framed, looked at, gazed upon, registered and controlled. In turn the world is constituted as an event, as a performance; the objects, events and people which constitute the world are made to perform for those watching and gazing (1998, p. 78).

> The notion of a narcissistic society embodies the idea that people act as if they are being looked at, as if they are at the centre of the attention of a real or imaginary audience (1998, p. 88).

The Spectacle/Performance paradigm cannot be more significant to understand current lives with media, as I am writing this when 'selfie'[15] has just been chosen as word of the year in the English and Dutch speaking world. Moreover, as I argued when concluding chapter one, the Spectacle/Performance paradigm makes clear how we should understand intimate storytelling as a media-related practice; it has in-

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15   A selfie is 'a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website' (see Oxford Word Blog, 2013).

creasingly become an entertaining performance where media skills, signs (Lash & Urry, 1994) and aesthetics (Featherstone, 2007) are important. 'Audiences' are a significant actor to understand the intimate stories of young people in social media. Sexuality, gender, desire and relationships have increasingly become spectacles, outside of their private spheres where they used to be common before the pace of modernity accelerated (Plummer, 2003). Intimacies are under continuous attention of imaginary audiences, of which the Internet and social media are important facilitators.

While the diffused audience and the Spectacle/Performance paradigm has its value, it has been criticised for not saying anything about the power of media on audiences (Couldry, 2010a). Livingstone (2012) argued recently that we need a fourth way of understanding audiences next to the simple/mass/diffused audiences; the framework of participation. The process of participation is well-suited to grasp the continuous power struggles of social media audiences (Carpentier, 2011b). As Livingstone (2012) notes, participation in media should be conceptualised broadly, in the sense that to participate in media, means to participate in the power struggles of culture and society:

> But, increasingly, we are interested in the contribution of audiences to understanding other civic and social collectivities, with the emphasis on participation in these wider domains rather than (just) to participation in media (2012, p. 268).

Understanding audiences through the lens of participatory complexities introduces meaningful practices regarding what people do when they tell intimate stories on social media, such as using *opportunity structures* for participation of technological communications media (Cammaerts, 2012). Undoubtedly, Web 2.0 technologies have empowered audiences, by not only allowing them to produce and distribute their stories independently from content providing mass media, but also by increasing democratic voicing possibilities. More diverse voices and stories can be made available to (possible) large audiences. Moreover, awareness of these voices has grown because of the Internet's networked

structure, which means, 'what spaces are required for political action had changed' (Couldry, 2010b, p. 140). The example I gave on the possibilities for gay and lesbian youth to remediate their coming out stories as political actions on YouTube is an illustration thereof (Alexander & Losh, 2010), but it can also be found in everyday micro politics on SNSs, where indicating your sexual identity as 'gay' or 'unknown' on a profile is meaningful within a heterosexual majority. In addition, the audience practice of *appropriation* needs to be mentioned. Although Web 2.0 offered technological opportunity structures for participation, people use popular social media platforms that are fixed templates to tell their stories. Software designs structure these environments, which makes them only semi-participatory organisations that facilitate access and interaction, but not unlimited participation (Carpentier, 2011b). Appropriation could be considered a media practice of audiences interpreting these software designs and using them in particular ways. Indeed, the appropriation of software should become of primary importance into reception studies of networked media (Livingstone & Das, 2013). Cultural media studies scholars studying popular culture used to conclude how audiences develop tactics to interpret popular media texts such as representations on television and in film, but these interpretative tactics have become the case for software as well (de Certeau, 1984/2003; De Ridder, 2013a; Fiske, 1989/2010).

If we want to grasp the work of audiences when telling stories in social media, it is useful to study the way people self-represent and how they make use of the opportunity structures of participation and appropriate software designs. We can inquire about these practices by understanding how they become meaningful in social media by analysing the particular symbolic politics in profiles. Further, it is important to talk with audiences and understand how they interpret these practices of others, but also how audiences reflect on their own practices and make sense of social media websites. In this way, we can understand the politics of participation; do audiences have opportunities to tell their own stories in given pluralities of hegemonic powers? Further, it is important to understand that audiences practices are not only constrained

by practices of media industries such as software design, as claimed by political economist of social media (e.g. Fuchs, 2011). Moreover, the imagination and the mythologisation of the presumed audience plays a role in the discourse on social media (Livingstone, 1999), but more specifically on young people's intimacies in SNSs. As Eden Litt (2012) noted when referring to the sociology of Charles Cooley, imagining audiences is a fundamental attribute of being human, necessary to understand every interaction; yet, social media have made the imagined audience increasingly complex:

> However, characteristics of social media platforms have altered the size, composition, boundaries, accessibility, and cue availability of our communication partners during everyday interactions making it nearly impossible to determine the actual audience (Litt, 2012, p. 332).

Audiences have become scary collectives in current youth cultures, leading to scary media literacies in which young people are being told creativity, entertainment and play should make room for realness and authentic identity management (van Zoonen, 2013) – which will be discussed in chapter three more in-depth. In current culture and society, the imagined audience has become a major source of contemporary fear, which we cannot seem to get under control. In the mediatised everyday lives of young people, the social and cultural construction of the imagined audiences may add complexities leading to more intense self-surveillance of behaviour in media, but maybe also outside of media. As surveillance is based on the disciplining of subjects, imagined audiences may reinforce symbolic exclusions of other than normative self-representations. To understand peer group inclusion or exclusion (Warrington & Younger, 2010) in current mediatised youth cultures, imagined audiences related to social media have become a complexity necessary to consider, as they may have the power to regulate, for better or for worse, a wide range of media-related practices in everyday life.

Actor media institutions

When people tell intimate stories within the mediated context of a SNS, not only audiences' practices, but also the media practices of the companies that operate SNSs platforms are meaningful to consider. In this way, practices of media institutions become powerful and interwoven within the everyday lives of people using social media, and maybe in a wide range of practices broadly oriented towards the media. Media institutions of social media belong to the media industries, meaning those institutions with 'the distinct emphasis on media production as the more exclusive domain of firms, companies and corporations of an endless variety in size and structure' (Deuze, 2007, p. 53). The most obvious media practice of SNSs is creating a platform for user-driven social interactions. SNSs are built around co-creation for which they offer software-based products; 'the media industry is undergoing a shift from creating content to providing platforms for user-driven social interactions and user-generated content' (Schäfer, 2011, p. 12). Notwithstanding this shift, I emphasised in chapter one how it is analytically useful to see social media as part of 'the media'. Because of the possibilities for co-creation, participation and the newness of Web 2.0 technologies, the wider public often understands social media as democratising society. The democratic role of social media is questioned and refuted by a number of critical voices (Carpentier, 2011b; Fuchs, 2011; Marwick, 2013), but discourses of 'revolutionary' and 'democratic' keep on dominating the public sphere. These particular discursive constructions of social media, often marketed by social media institutions themselves (van Dijck, 2013a), are a challenge for media studies. With social media and SNSs, a new mediated 'centre' came into existence. A widespread technological unconsciousness (Beer, 2009) and blindness for the transformative mediation process of social media dominates current culture and society as argued by Couldry (2011):

> The rise of social-networking sites (SNS) suggests a new type of mediated "center" (indeed, a new type of "live" connection) in which the focus is not central media institutions, and through them the state

and a social center, but ourselves, our friends and family, and our horizontal social world. There is no doubt that social networking sites are a development of fundamental importance for our understanding of media and audiences, but we must not forget media industries' intense interest in colonizing social-networking space. Rather than expecting SNS to undermine "the media" and horizontally deconstruct "the audience," it is more plausible to suggest that SNS, as sites for performance and mutual engagement, will develop in close linkage with central media in a sort of double helix (2011, p. 215).

As argued in chapter one, not only society, but also cultural and youth studies research on young people's intimacies in social media does not engage critically with the myth of the mediated centre. We cannot expose the politics of gender, sexuality, desire and relationships in youth culture through analysing them on social media. Rather, we can only grasp the symbolic politics of intimacy in a particular mediated context.[16] Popular social media spaces such as Netlog, Facebook and LinkedIn are different organisations. Therefore, the contexts of how these media institutions operate is necessary to take into account (Papacharissi, 2009). If we want to understand the mediated context of SNSs, we should understand their (1) technologies, (2) market and (3) cultural powers (De Ridder, 2013a).

My focus will be on *software design* as a practice of media institutions. However, numerous practices, processes and cultural histories are interrelated with the creation of SNSs software platforms. As Raymond Williams (1975/2003) approach to media has taught us, we should start the study of communications media with insights on technology. The participation of audiences within social media is co-constituted by material aspects of computer technology, software, and the Internet as a complex networked structure (Schäfer, 2011). However, technologies

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16   At this point, my ontological position differs from classical cultural studies. I do not agree with the position that everything becomes meaningful through representations. Following the logic of cultural studies, it would be possible to enquire about the politics of intimacy in social media by looking at profiles as textual representations.
The point is, outside of representation, things can be meaningful. Moreover, media studies should be more than studies of representations; they should understand the power of media in the shaping of everyday lives (for a recent discussion on this argument see Moores, 2012).

develop within the realms of socio-cultural worlds. Critical theorist of technology Andrew Feenberg (2010) argued technology serves societies' hegemony; 'modern forms of hegemony are based on a specific type of technical mediation of a variety of social activities' (Feenberg, 2010, p. 6). Leah Lievrouw argues (2006) technologies have some engineering specifications, but they are far from only material or rational:

> They develop in dynamic environments where users, designers, manufacturers, investors, regulators, distributors, and others work out their interrelated and competing interests, cultural assumptions, desires and visions (2006, p. 246).

As noted by Mirko Tobias Schäfer (2011), software is 'an artefact completely unlike anything else used earlier in history' (Ibid. p. 63). Software is a form of language, a programming language that uses code, but it is material at the same time, as it creates a means of production. Indeed, software is primarily used for media authorship (Manovich, 2013) when everyday users are on the computer, but it is also used by cultural industries to produce more software. Software is never finished, but continuously builds on the work of others; parts of software programmes can be integrated into other software programmes by copying codes. Consequently, software is eminently intertextual and resides in a never ending phase of development (Schäfer, 2011). Software professionals in the cultural industries are referred to as designers; they are an important part of the media marketplace of SNSs (Taylor, 2003). Designers are creative professionals that 'must be seen as shaped by the individual and collective professional identities' (Deuze, 2007, p. 58). Designers engineer software applications, but they also use media production values such as visuals, styles and sounds. SNSs are built on a platform which is an architectural concept consisting of the basics of software (a design and codes), but also an interface and protocols. The platform's architecture 'is always the temporary outcome of its owner's attempt to steer users' activities in a certain direction' (van Dijck, 2012, p. 4). A protocol is a 'formal description of digital message formats complemented by rules for regulating those messages in or between computing

systems' (Ibid. p. 4). Protocols are the back end of the website or internal interface, hidden behind the user-friendly interfaces audiences' view, the front end of the website. The way protocols steer audiences on the website is 'predicted upon social practices' (Ibid, p. 5). For example, the popular SNS Netlog, which will be discussed in the empirical chapters of this dissertation, wants their subscribers 'to get to know new people' (Netlog, n.d.). When someone subscribes to the website, the person will need to complete a profile, while the software will also automatically track the users' location (which is called geo targeting). Combined with information that the user has filled in (referred to as metadata) and the location, protocols will automatically steer the user in the back end towards whom the user can connect at the front end. Netlog makes every experience on the SNS personalised, it will stimulate connections based on the users' age, location and interests. These processes at the back end are based on the users' social practices, but they are invisible.

How storytelling practices become meaningful in relation to the practice of software design is my primary concern here; therefore, I use the aforementioned insights from practice theory, although I briefly mention other related perspectives related. Theories on the social shaping of technology, which emphasise the importance of 'human choices and action in technological change' (Lievrouw, 2006, p. 248) are significant, such as the social construction of technology (SCOT) approach (Bijker, Carlson, & Pinch, 1993). Further, actor network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005), as mentioned in chapter one in relation to practice theory, is particularly powerful in the analysis of how human and non-human actants converge. However, notwithstanding a practice theory approach connects with these insights, practice theory is far more concerned with power, history and culture (Ortner, 2006), which is why I use it as my theoretical toolbox.[17]

Next to technology, market powers of SNSs, which make clear that SNSs are commercially successful enterprises, need to be taken into account. The political economy of the media studies, in its most obvious

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17 I leave out the 'diffusions of innovations' theory of Everett M. Rogers here. This theory is widely used in communication sciences and enquires about 'how new ideas and practices are introduced in a social system' (Lievrouw, 2006, p. 250).

form, how media institutions such as SNSs are making money (Fenton, 2007). Critical political economy thinkers go so far to say that social media exploits the free labour of users (Andrejevic, 2011; Terranova, 2000), which only serves the digital economy. People need to produce content to be allowed in online socialising in SNSs (Thumim, 2012). Although these critical insights have value, I have argued in chapter one how we should be careful to see media as only serving or resisting ideology. The political economy approach of Manuel Castells in his work *Communication Power* (2009) offers a deeper economic, political and legal analysis to ground the analysis of media institutions, such as SNSs, into a political economy context (van Dijck, 2012, 2013a).

Media institutions and their practice of designing software have particular cultural powers, such as structuring and fixing online identities in particular ways. Cultural powers are connected to market powers through the marketing and branding of the website. However, cultural powers make clear that the platform of SNSs is much more than a technology or a corporation; platforms can be understood in a socio-cultural and political sense (Gillespie, 2012; van Dijck, 2013a). Platforms are 'cultural templates' (Rettberg, 2009) which, to refer again to Feenberg, are constructed around societies hegemony. The recent work of José van Dijck (2013a) has shown how social media operates in a social and cultural organisation of sociality, deeply intertwined within the everyday lives of people. Specifically related to this dissertation, social media also operates in the social and cultural organisation of gender, sexuality, desire and relationships through the practice of software design. The work already done in this area extends the insights from feminist critiques on media as technologies. Feminist theorists of technology argue the 'mutual shaping' of gender and technology, which is defined as both a source and a consequence of gender relations (van Zoonen, 2002; Wajcman, 2010). Moreover, feminist thinkers have contributed to insights on digital embodiment and normative reproductions of gender in online interactions (O'Brien, 1999; Wajcman, 2010).[18] More recently, the work of criti-

18   See also my earlier arguments in this chapter on practice theory and the material body. Practice theory emphasises the material body as key in every action.

cal digital humanists on sexuality and gender (van Doorn, 2009, 2011) and queer criticisms on SNSs (Cover, 2012; Light, 2011; Van House, 2011), argued the socio-cultural and political dynamics of SNSs are best understood through processes of performativity and materialisation, which are central in the theory of Judith Butler (1993, 1990/2006). Both performativity and materialisation are concerned with how the heterosexual matrix, the coherent system regulating intimacy, becomes 'naturalised' through enactments in everyday life. Performativity is the repetitive citation of a constructed stability in our intimate identities, as Rob Cover (2012) explains in relation to SNSs:

> Performativity, then, is identity produced through the citation of culturally given identity categories or norms in a reiterative process, and occurs across both offline and online actions – in this theoretical framework it would be a mistake to think of social networking behaviour, for example, as being only a representation or biographical statement or set of conscious and voluntary choices made by individuals or in accord with particular backgrounds or demographics (2012, p. 180).

SNSs are performative tools that discipline subjects on many different levels. Take for example the limiting drop-down menus social media platforms offer, in which we can only choose between fixed categories of male vs. female, often mandatory to fill in. In addition, SNS platforms stimulate the production of content, through which intimate stories become endless performative flows that push a continuous iterability (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). Performativity as a socio-cultural technological concept limits democratic voicing possibilities and regulates intimate storytelling within hegemonic boundaries. Moreover, as I have explained, the production of software *an sich* is performative, because it is intertextual and builds further on already existing codes (Schäfer, 2011). In addition, there is materialisation as an invisible process that constrains voice, and thus also limits a diversity of intimate stories to be told (Couldry, 2010b, pp. 121-122). Materialisation is a complex argument developed by Butler to explain how bodies matter in her arguments on gender performativity. She explains 'materiality

will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect. And there will be no way to understand "gender" as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, understood either as "the body" or its given sex' (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Butler, as a literary theorist, understands the body as material, but only through discourse. The process of materialisation then, is how the body becomes disciplined within the order of coherence around a stable sex/gender/desire. I argue here that, *bodies matter in the sense of becoming materialised through media practices*. We can think about current social media platforms where bodies are no longer constructed using texts, but through numerous digital photos, taking pictures with smartphones – a selfie –, using the webcam to broadcast live, and so on (van Doorn, 2011). Looking at pictures is, as I noticed in my own research and in other audience studies on young people's social media use (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013; Livingstone, 2008; Mallan, 2009), the most named activity on social media. This is because these visual representations of the body carry with them a sense of authenticity and realness in which audiences look to break down anonymity. Moreover, some research argues that pictures and a loss of anonymity have made particular 'sexy' gendered bodies more salient, intensifying stereotypical online gender norms (Bailey, et al., 2013; Kapidzic & Herring, 2011), reconfiguring SNSs as heteronormative environments (Sveningsson, 2007). This intensified materialisation through media practices connects to the software designs of popular social media platforms, which are currently more aimed at reconstructing the body through visual self-representations, compared to older textual based community websites. Thereby, current popular social media websites continuously claim authenticity through materialising the body (van Doorn, 2010).

Conclusion: An articulation model[19]
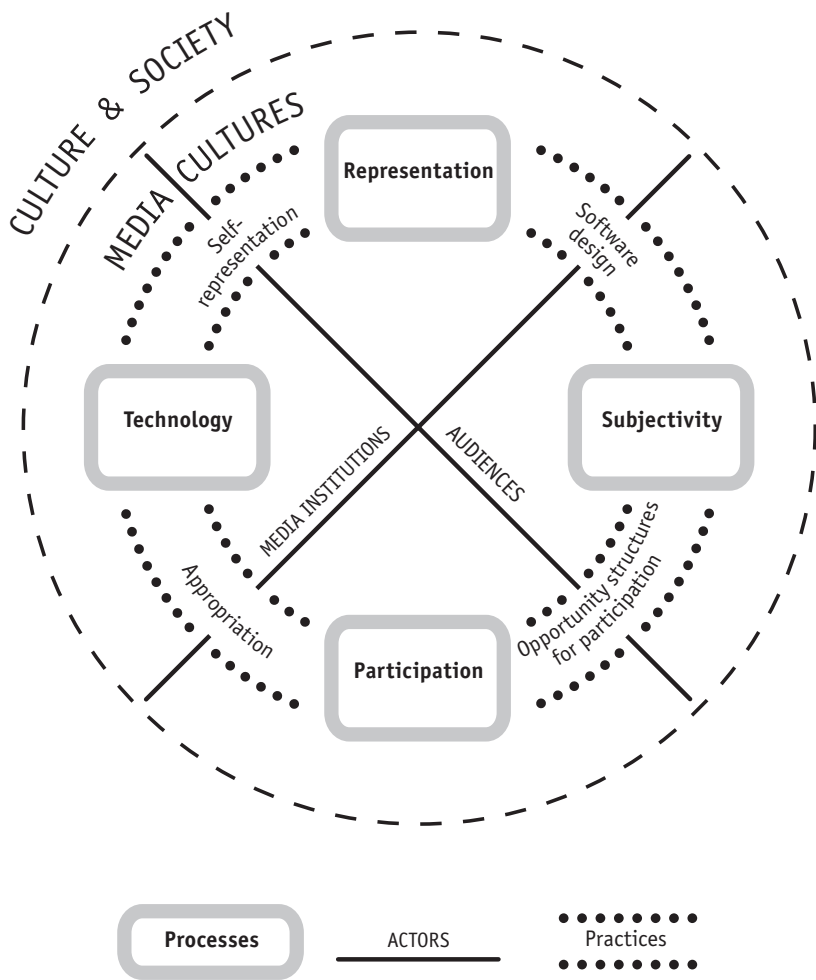
Intimate stories are inextricably intertwined with the emergence of modern societies in which private and public dialogues are blurred.

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19 The articulation model I propose here has benefitted from many useful comments at the ECREA Doctoral Summer School I attended in Ljubljana, August 2012. In particular, I would like to thank Bart Cammaerts, Nico Carpentier, Pille Pruulman-Vengerfeldt and Tereza Pavlíćková for taking the time to discuss my ideas in-depth and for making helpful comments and suggestions.

Media have been important in this process, as they may be responsible for the growth in intimate stories we are witnessing in culture and society (Plummer, 2003). Intimate stories are embodied human actions that give meaning to gender, sexuality, desires and relationships. Intimate stories flow within discourse, power and control. We can grasp how intimacy becomes meaningful in the lives of people by looking at particular practices. The intense mediation of intimate storytelling using SNSs transforms intimate storytelling to a number of media practices, which we should understand to enquire about the social and cultural organisation of intimacy in social media. I have defined four significant media practices: (1) self-representation, (2) software design, (3) appropriation, and (4) using opportunity structures for participation.

Figure one summarises the insights, primarily to explain the complexity behind the media practices, which can only be understood in articulation with the processes of representation, subjectivity, participation and technology, and the actors: audiences and media institutions. Articulation has been understood in cultural studies as 'a number of distinct processes whose interaction can and does lead to variable and contingent outcomes' (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 2003, p. 3). However, the model of articulation in cultural studies has been used to explore cultural meanings, while I have expanded it to social practices; the model here takes the social, cultural and material into account. The primary aim is to revisit functionalist accounts on the media, such as the incorporation/resistance paradigm which, as mentioned in chapter one, is often used to make sense of young people's intimacies on SNSs. The proposed articulation model oscillates dialectically between structure and agency. The articulation of processes, actors and practices, disentangles the mediating work of SNSs, which is necessary to grasp the social and cultural organisation of intimacy, in particular, in social media contexts.

In the final theoretical chapter three of this dissertation, I will expand the articulation model to media cultures. In this way, the workings of the model will be made more explicit. If we understand what both audiences and media institutions do, we can understand the un-

folding intimate media cultures; media cultures then help to make sense of intimacy in our everyday life-worlds. This is the very process through which media becomes powerful and interwoven into everyday lives. Media cultures do not only connect to the processes, actors and practices I described; they are equally informed by a wider culture and society. Media cultures are the cultures of mediatisation (Hepp, 2012). Chapter three will focus on the transformation of intimacy in young people's everyday lives, connected to social media use.

CITIZENSHIPS:
Unfolding Intimate Media Cultures

> In effect, the Big Picture is just that: a picture. And then the question can be raised: in which movie theatre, in which exhibit gallery is it shown? Through which optics is it projected? To which audience is it addressed? I propose to call panoramas the new clamps by asking obsessively such questions. Contrary to oligoptica, panoramas, as etymology suggests, see everything. But they also see nothing since they simply show an image painted (or projected) on the tiny wall of a room fully closed to the outside.
>
> Bruno Latour[20]

Chapter two presented the mediating work of SNSs through exposing the non-linearity of several processes, actors and practices that are significant to understand young people's intimate stories in social media contexts. This third and final theoretical chapter is aimed at sketching a more linear, 'bigger picture' or a 'panorama', in Bruno Latour's words. This chapter explores how we can grasp the transformation of young people's intimacies related to the ubiquitous presence of social

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20 See Latour (2005, p. 187)

media and SNSs in their everyday lives. Therefore, the concept of intimate media cultures, as cultures of mediatisation (Hepp, 2012), will be introduced. Here, I will focus on how media cultures, as related to a wider culture and society, make sense of young people's intimacies as lived (Williams, 1958/2002) in social media through particular media ideologies; these are powerful beliefs about media, shaping how society thinks young people should live their sexualities, genders, desires and relationships in media (Gershon, 2010a). Last, I will introduce a reconfiguration of the politics of media ideologies; it makes sense to understand intimate storytelling in social media as a popular media practice. Popular media practices open up possibilities for imagination, creativity and emancipation, which are hitherto silenced when society makes sense of young people's intimacies in social media.

Young people's intimacies on SNSs as intimate media cultures

To talk about media cultures, we should understand culture. As Elizabeth Bird (2003) noted, 'We cannot really isolate the role of media in culture, because the media are firmly anchored into the web of culture, although articulated by individuals in particular ways' (Ibid. p. 3). For Longhurst (2007, p. 7), media resources are constitutive of wider processes of cultural change in people's ordinary lives. He argued that contemporary cultures are media drenched and dominated by a ubiquitous media presence. Longhurst criticises the often used concept of everyday life as being 'media saturated' (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013), because saturated 'perhaps suggests that no more can be added and I do not think that we have reached the end point of media development' (Longhurst, 2007, p. 3). Although Longhurst makes a convincing remark here, rather than seeing our cultures as media saturated, we should see our own practices in everyday lives as media saturated. Media cultures can only become constitutive of reality when they are

appropriated, and further domesticated (Hepp, 2012). This means exploring how media 'are embedded in practical activity as people move through the environments, of which they too are part, and how media are thus part of our experiential worlds in ways that account for, but go beyond, content (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2013, p. 689). The recent turn in media studies to a *non-media-centric approach* (Moores, 2012; Morley, 2007; Pink, 2012) exposes changes in how everyday rituals, practices and meanings are becoming media-related when they were not related to media before (Couldry, 2003). Media cultures are therefore constitutive of changes in our perceptions of realities. Media transform because, first, they are converting 'lived tradition' into 'symbolic content' (Hepp, 2012, p. 31), second, they are reorganising places as media spaces (Couldry & McCarthy, 2004), and groups of people as audiences (Livingstone, 2012).

Young people's intimacies are transformed because intimate practices are becoming more media-related. For example, digital communications media are transforming the way young people begin, maintain, and end intimate relationships (Gershon, 2010a; Ito, et al., 2010). One example thereof is how social media have become meaningful tools to institutionalise relationships. Social media have reorganised the practices, places, and scale to make intimate relationships public:

> Social network sites play an increasingly larger role as couples become solidified and become what some call "Facebook official."
> At this point in a relationship, teens might indicate relationship status through ordering Friends in a particular hierarchy, changing the formal statement of relationship status, giving gifts, and displaying pictures (Ito, et al., 2010, p. 123).

The practice of making intimate relationships 'Facebook official' should be contextualised to what this particular transformation actually means in everyday life. Therefore, we should understand how these practices are made meaningful, in Raymond Williams (1958/2002) words, we should understand media cultures *as lived*. Culture, in a wide sense, is the 'sum of different classificatory systems and discursive formations'

(S. Hall, 1997a, p. 222),[21] producing knowledge; this cultural approach explores the discursive meanings of practices. Media cultures contextualise media practices, which is crucial for understanding their role in everyday life. In the case of teenagers institutionalising their relationships, an SNS as a cultural artefact becomes to stand for something else (du Gay, et al., 2003), that is, as a place where young people institutionalise and authenticate their intimate relationships. This illustrates how media cultures are 'collections of sense-making practices whose main sources of meaning are media' (Couldry, 2012, p. 159). *My specific interest will be in intimate media cultures, which I define as a way of sense making about gender, sexuality, relationships and desires as lived through the media. Through media means, not only as in represented through media, but also broadly oriented towards media. Intimate media cultures, as related to social media, are recognisable by people as distinctive media cultures. They are assembled around specific practices of self-representation, software design, appropriation and opportunity structures of participation (see Figure 1). Those practices become meaningful in articulation around a collective of actual and imagined audiences extending far beyond computer screens, through media institutions, their marketing activities, software designs, and daily management of the online place.*

Young people's intimacies are changing, because they live them in digital communications media (Deuze, 2012); for young people, their intimate socialities and cultures are unimaginable without media. For example, Ari Schwarz (2011) concludes how instant messaging, as a popular communication tool between young people, installed a 'networked intimacy', in which disclosure and closeness take place under new conditions. Schwarz discusses how the shift from oral communication, phone or face-to-face interaction, to instant messaging, has installed an interpersonal sphere to live intimacy based on new regimes such as the sharing of evidence of the successes in young people's romantic and sexual experiences. Instant messaging software allows the copying and pasting of texts, which lead to new ways of 'proving' and authen-

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21 Hall argues these discursive formations become meaningful through language. However, following practice theory, discursive meaning is produced through practices. Language is important, but only in its routinized use (see Reckwitz, 2002).

ticating romantic successes. The analysis of the 'interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other' (Couldry & Hepp, 2013, p. 197) is what has been conceptualised as the process of mediatisation. The mediatisation of young people's intimate life-worlds critically exposes the social and cultural organisation of intimacy as lived in media, and the consequences of a pervasive spread of media contents and platforms. Mediatisation explores the evolution of modernity in relation to media, but also how media are constitutive of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Although John B. Thompson (1995) emphasised the role of the media in relation to changing institutions in culture and society some time ago, the interrelationships between historical changes in media and communication are often ignored in relation to other transformational processes (Hepp, 2012, p. 38). Chapter one mentioned the different transformational processes significant for understanding young people's intimacies in SNSs such as individualisation (focusing on 'risk') (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), sexualisation (cultures of sexiness) (Attwood, 2009) and commercialisation (commodification, popular mass culture, aesthetics, spectacle, celebrification) (Featherstone, 2007; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002); the role of mediatisation as meta-process of change is equally important here (Krotz, 2009).

The mediatisation of intimacy becomes concrete in intimate media cultures; it is a way of sense making of intimacy through the media. This sense making 'moulds' (Hepp, 2012) the way we live genders, sexualities, relationships and desires in mediatised worlds. If we return to intimate storytelling, we can now understand how intimate storytelling in everyday life is shaped through making sense of intimate media cultures. This process of shaping is how media, and social media in particular, become powerful and interwoven in young people's intimate life-worlds. Intimate media cultures become meaningful through the sense making practices of the media institutions that shape them. Equally, the meanings and specific organisations attached to being an audience in social media are essential in understanding how to make sense of intimate media cultures.

The meanings of SNSs institutions regarding online sociality and identity

Social media institutions are involved in the symbolic production of sociality – and intimacy in particular – through creating a particular software design, which is different for every social media website. As argued in chapter two, these platforms are products steering social interaction. Moreover, they have particular cultural powers, externalised in the processes of performativity and materialisation. Other than producing meanings about sociality through designing software, recent insights on the cultural history of the Web 2.0 phenomenon and social media (John, 2012; Marwick, 2013; van Dijck, 2013a) argue that the cultural meanings that social media institutions produce about online interaction go much deeper. According to José van Dijck, 'Recent changes in our global media landscape have profoundly affected – if not driven – our experience of sociality'. Van Dijck (2013b) argued this is mainly because after 2008:

> Most corporate site owners shifted their focus from running community-oriented platforms to monetizing connectivity by maximizing lucrative data traffic between people, things and ideas [....] Along with this shift came a change in platforms' architectures; rather than being databases of personal information they became tools for (personal) storytelling and narrative self-presentation [sic] (2013b, p. 200).

In order to monetise connectivity, social media owners introduced a controlled platform, marketing keywords to describe online sociality such as 'sharing', 'friending', 'liking', 'connecting' and 'following', boosting connectivity for making maximum profit out of people's data (John, 2012; van Dijck, 2013b). Moreover, Facebook, as the dominant SNS today,[22] markets particular ideas about online identities, which should, according to their own marketing terms, be authenticity based, and constructed around our real names. Following quote is how Facebook represents itself in a European report on 'the implantation of safer social

22   Among Flemish youth, Facebook is reported as the most popular website, 80 percent of young people have account on Facebook (Jeugddienst & Jeugdwerknet, 2012).

networking principles for the EU', authored by Elisabeth Staksrud and Bojana Lobe:

> Facebook gives people the power to share, making the world more open and connected. Worldwide, we have more than 200 million active users keeping their friends and families up to date with the happenings in their lives. Facebook's *authenticity-based, real name culture,* as well as its innovative privacy controls and safety features are designed to build a safer and more trusted online experience [own emphasis] (2010).

This particular sense making about online identities is far from the anonymous environment the Internet used to be (Lovink, 2012), and where 'identity play' was seen as emancipatory (Turkle, 1996). Van Dijck (2013) argued Facebook, as the dominant SNS today, might have a lasting impact long after it has lost its current popularity. Facebook and other dominant players on the social media market today are media institutions that created dominant values on how we should behave online, thereby setting the norms to what we should understand as 'decent' online practices. As Alice Marwick (2013) noted, 'In fact, the values promoted by users of social media are those of the enterprise business culture' (2013, p. 279). As van Dijck (2013b) notes, people have learned to exploit current social media cultures of connectivity, in which values such as a high social status, branding the self as an 'authentic' person carefully constructing its own popularity:

> Promoting and branding the self has also become a normalized, accepted phenomenon in ordinary people's lives. Following the examples of celebrities' self-promotion, many users (especially young adults and teenagers) shape their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness (2013b, p. 203).

The focus on self-promotion, branding and the process of celebrification, which is the transformation of ordinary people into celebrities (Driessens, 2013), demands careful balancing to maintain the status of being 'authentic' and 'real'. The logics of social media, and particularly

its dominant players such as Facebook, have the power to affect young people's intimate media cultures, which are 'marked by the commercial imperatives now mediating information and communication processes that were, until recently, both more private (i.e. personal) and yet more public (i.e. non-profit) (Livingstone, 2013, p. 113).

The meanings of young SNSs audiences on online sociality and identity

Audience studies are of key importance to understand the media cultures of SNSs. Studies on how young people reflect on their own self-representations in social media (Van Cleemput, 2008), the self-representational practices of their peers and the uses of social media in everyday life (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013; Bailey, et al., 2013; Livingstone, 2008; Manago, et al., 2008) are useful in exposing sense making practices about social media. There is a general tendency noticeable in audience studies on young people's sense makings about social media after 2008. These audience studies find how young people increasingly interpret social media as, 'more about self-promotion', 'more serious', 'more authentic', and 'more dangerous'.[23]

A recent study on the role of SNSs in young people's everyday lives (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013) showed how young people's understandings are constructed around three main findings. First, SNSs are used for 'connecting and convenience', allowing easy communication with peers, maintaining and deepening relationships and extending everyday life places; being on SNSs is a pleasant routine activity. Second, SNSs provide 'openness and control'; online communication allows honest communication with more control than offline, which is also convenient to control the dangers of strangers wanting to make contact. Third, young people seem to emphasise 'privacy and authenticity' as important, designing their self-representations close to their offline selves, but at the same time concluding connections on social media are not as 'real' as

23   However, I have knowledge of one study conducted in Flanders in 2007, which noted how young people from Flanders reported that they want their self-representation to be as close to who they are in real life (Van Cleemput, 2008).

in daily life. A recent study of Jaine Bailey and colleagues (Bailey, et al., 2013), shows the complexities of current cultures of connectivity in SNSs, which are based on status and self-promotion (Marwick, 2013; van Dijck, 2013b). This research exposed how teenagers worry about the 'seriousness' of their pictures on social media for finding a job in the future, while there also seems to be a general pressure, on young girls especially, to carefully manage self-representations as not 'too public' or 'slutty'. However, the contradiction of these mores about online identities is that some self-promotion and displaying some sexiness can also be facilitative among peer groups, which demands a careful balancing act, as Bailey et al. (2013) noted:

> Our participants understood online social networking as a commoditized environment in which a particular kind of self-exposure might be seen as the currency exchanged for markers of social success and popularity such as compliments and a higher tally of friends, which, according to our participants, were particularly important at younger ages (2013, p. 107).

As this study concludes, these contradictions and judgements based on stereotypical gendered and heterosexualised norms may debouch into an intense surveillance among peers, which I have referred to in chapter two as a fear of imagined audiences.

Interestingly, it could be said that a parallel exists between what van Dijck (2013a) noticed about social media's shift to 'cultures of connectivity' after 2008, and how young audiences make sense of their online life-worlds and identities. Livingstone's audience study, conducted before 2008 when the SNS MySpace[24] was popular, shows how young people talked about 'fun' in social media through building 'humorous relationships', which are 'not so much about personal self-disclosures' (Livingstone, 2008, p. 399). Moreover, inauthenticity, as a way of gaining emotional pleasure of producing an ideal self-representational pro-

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24 MySpace came to the social media market in 2003 as a niche platform to distribute music among fans, artists, industries and enthusiasts. Later on, MySpace became the most popular mainstream network among young and higher educated people. After 2008, MySpace lost a significant amount of members to Facebook, which remains the dominant SNS to date. MySpace allowed people to work with codes to construct profiles in more creative ways, different from the more serious and authentic 'business like' designs of Facebook (Baym, 2010; van Dijck, 2013a).

file picture, was positively evaluated by young people, while anonymity has also been reported on positively. Audience studies on MySpace (Livingstone, 2008; Manago, et al., 2008) concluded how this online space was more about 'trying out' self-representation and online identities, which should not be taken too seriously, rather be creative with (Manago, et al., 2008). Although the assumption raised here needs more empirical validation, young people's intimate media cultures seem to be related to social media institutions' sense-making practices about online sociality, which has particular consequences for the social and cultural organisation of gender, sexuality, relationships and desires as lived in social media environments.

The remediation of intimate storytelling: Power, discourse and control of intimacy through media ideologies

> Whatever else the present stage in the history of modernity is, it is also, perhaps above all, post-Panoptical. What mattered in Panopticon was that the people in charge were assumed always to 'be there', nearby, in the controlling tower. What matters in post-Panoptical power-relations is that the people operating the levers of power on which the fate of the less volatile partners in the relationship depends can at any moment escape beyond reach – into sheer inaccessibility.
> Zygmunt Bauman[25]

> The fundamental dilemma in the network society is that political institutions are not the site of power any longer. The real power is the power of instrumental flows, and cultural codes, embedded in networks.
> Manuel Castells[26]

25   See Bauman (2000, p. 11)

26   See Castells (2000, p. 23)

Power is one essential element of culture, and thus also of media cultures. Media practices, and equally those practices that are broadly oriented towards the media, do not have a 'central point' of power. Power, as defined by Michel Foucault (1976/1998), 'is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable' (Foucault, 1976/1998, pp. 93-94). Power is, as Foucault added, not centralised within an institution, as in a media institution, but related to 'other types of relationships' of power such as inequalities in intimate sexual relationships, gender, and so on. Media cultures make sense of which practices are seen as superior, which is relevant to understand how some intimate stories are considered superior to others. People have ideas about which self-representations are better or worse, but also particular software designs are judged within relations of power. An example hereof is how Facebook, which requires 'real names', creates trust, while anonymous social media websites, and people's activities on those websites, are often interpreted as less trustworthy (Baym, 2010, p. 109). Ideas of superiority in media cultures are shaped through making sense of media practices, which are related to media institutions and audiences.

Further, media cultures are connected to a wide range of discourses in culture and society. Specifically related to intimacy and young people, current public spheres are dominated by moral panics (K. Thompson, 1998) communicated by pundits, policymakers and scholars, who continuously emphasise 'sensational risks' related to young people's social media use (Pascoe, 2011). As mentioned in chapter one, young people's intimate media cultures are made sense of as either at risk or full of democratic opportunities, a fascination with 'digital natives' versus emerging needs for more control over young people's online activities (Livingstone, 2013). Risk discourses have become central mechanisms into the disciplining of young people's intimacies on social media, instituting a discourse which demands more regulation and management (Ringrose, 2011b). Examples are 'new media pundits' writing self-help books on 'identity management', which is broadly understood as 'a diversity of mechanisms to authenticate individuals in specific contexts'

(van Zoonen, 2013, p. 46). Under the name of safety, media literacies concentrate on how to make safe choices, which are needed to control young people's self-representational practices in digital communications media. How these discourses become interwoven into young people's media practices is the emergence of a new mechanism of control, flowing through widespread media ideologies.

Media ideologies, as recently defined by media anthropologist Illana Gershon (2010a, 2010b), explain the power of media cultures:

> The medium shapes the message in part because people have media ideologies that shape the way they think about and use different media. Media ideologies are a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning (2010a, p. 3).

However, I do not relate to the McLuhanian idea of the 'medium shaping/massaging the message' through its material technologies (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). Media ideologies relate to specific cultural dynamics, associated with beliefs, values, communicative actions and specific appropriations of media (Hepp, 2012, p. 60). Gershon (2010) explained how media ideologies are based on older media, which always determine how newer media will be perceived, 'Each new medium is instantly enmeshed in a web of media ideologies' (Gershon, 2010b, p. 287). Drawing on the concept of remediation (Grusin & Bolter, 1998), Gershon made clear how new media forms are in a continuous dialogue with older media, reconfiguring how people perceive older media, but also co-constructing their practices in newer media forms. Therefore, the remediation of intimate stories through making use of SNSs is informed by a complex web of already existing media ideologies related to ordinary people's participations in media – the so called 'demotic turn' (Turner, 2010) – such as media ideologies of self-representational media genres like reality television (Thumim, 2012). Further, media ideologies can refer to how people make sense of the material forms of media technologies, the particular channels (e.g. particular social media platforms) and the particular representations of what is produced in these media.

Media ideologies are well suited to understanding the power of media cultures and the wider mediatisation of culture and society, but media ideologies must never been seen as outside of their relationships to other forms of power and ideology.[27] Related to intimate media cultures and young people's social media use, current media ideologies that are constructed around discourses of risks versus opportunities, management and regulation, authenticity and realness, are often based on values, mores and norms about identities, genders, sexualities, intimacies and desires. Current intimate media cultures on social media use could be said to facilitate a fixing of particular identities, rather than support the idea of a fragmented self (van Zoonen, 2013). This particular sense making of young people's social media cultures in current society has the power to constrain democratic voicing possibilities in social media in particular ways. Intimate media cultures could therefore be situated within the system of heteronormative intelligibility that only recognises a particular form of intimacy as valuable. However, the flow of power in networked structures (Castells, 2000), fabricated around communicative interactions of numerous individuals, is what Zygmunt Bauman (2000) referred to as post-Panoptical. Young people today have enormous possibilities, such as global access to information, opportunities for interaction and participation to tell their own intimate stories to particular or large audiences, without someone being directly there in the controlling tower. Yet, as referred to in chapter two, in times of post-queer politics (Ruffolo, 2009), disciplinary societies take a new line of flight to postmodern forms of control (Deleuze, 1992), in which media cultures play a significant role. Controlling mechanisms, of which surveillance is a particular example (Lyon, 2001), are situated within platforms steering sociality in particular ways, reconfigurations of actual and imagined audiences, and wider discourses in culture and society on the Internet and social media. When looking at intimate storytelling practices in media today, we can find numerous counterforces to heteronormative identity constructions (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Pullen,

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27 I have taken a Gramscianist approach to ideologies, which means I consider ideologies to be open for contestations (see chapter two). Illana Gerschon refers to this particular interpretation when she explains how to make sense of the concept media ideology (Gershon, 2010b).

2012). Although people can transcend disciplinary regimes of gender, sexuality and desire through appropriating participatory media, networked structures allow numerous inaccessible – perceived or real – moments of control. Control societies are a typical feature of late modern societies, in which systems of gender, sexuality and desire are to some extent reflexive, but at the same time are still governed by essentialist beliefs as if intimate selves have one authentic (e.g. 'real', 'biological', or 'genetic') core defining the total system of our intimate sexualities (Rahman & Jackson, 2010, p. 149).

These new forms of control related to media ideologies obstruct voicing possibilities in social media through 'emotional labour', which is a particular form of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996).[28] Emotional labour is the cost of self-surveillance to retain a high authentic status in social media environments (Marwick, 2013, p. 198). Further, emotional labour connects to feelings when telling stories outside of heteronormative intelligibility, such as shame, anxiety and doubt. For example, Katherine Sender (2012) uses the concept of emotional labour to denote the remaining difficulties for gay and lesbian people to tell their intimate stories as equal to self-identified heterosexuals in digital communications media. Coming out as gay or lesbian is still an emotional process of transforming a shameful identity position towards a kind of 'pride' over one's sexual identity (Rasmussen, 2006). Sender critiqued the position of Christopher Pullen, who argued 'new storytelling' possibilities – among which facilitated by digital communications media – have created an intensive agency, a new reflexivity which opens up 'new narratives of engagement', challenging normative ideologies (Pullen, 2012, p. 14). However, the emotional labour of transforming shame into pride is not taken into account here: what about negative reactions of audiences through commenting? Especially related to young people, what about real or perceived risks of being excluded from their peer groups when telling their own intimate stories (Warrington & Younger, 2010)? These considerations, which have become part of young people's everyday lives, are emerging complexities of the mediatisation of intimacy

28   Immaterial labour is a concept from Marxist cultural theorist Maurizio Lazzarato, which he defined as activities that fix certain cultural standards. Lazzarato explored the semiotic operations of capitalism in the production of subjectivity.

related to the magnitude of imagined audiences. Although these complexities were there before the emergence of social media, the intense interrelation of SNSs with youth culture, and the large-scale everyday appropriations of networked media within peer groups, has intensified possible moments of control.

Intimate storytelling as a popular media practice: Emancipation in social media

> Studying the media as resources for popular imagination and emancipation means that their overall importance in the history of modernity has far outweighed their scale as a sector of the economy. They are 'enabling social technology' - like the law, science, and markets, all of which are important as coordinating and regulating mechanism that enable other kind of creativity to flourish.
> John Hartley[29]

The politics of intimate media cultures relate to young people's social media use. Intimate media cultures come into existence through the articulation of processes, actors and particular practices, but also relate to sense making practices in culture and society (see Figure 1). I want to argue that current intimate media cultures obstruct possibilities for a democratic voicing and diversity of intimate stories to be told in social media spaces related to the disciplining and control of gender, sexuality, relationships and desires in mediatised youth cultures. However, media studies have not yet critically exposed these emerging intimate media cultures in young people's everyday lives enough. Nevertheless, media studies have offered alternatives to rethink media cultures as spaces for emancipation, such as the recent theoretical contributions in the field that have emphasised the potentialities of digital media for creativity, emancipation, democratisation and imagination (Deuze, 2012; Hartley,

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29   See Hartley (2012, p. 7)

2012; Jenkins, 2006). These insights are scarcely adopted when scholars write about young people's genders, sexualities, relationships and desires related to digital communications media. Theories arguing the emancipatory possibilities of media argue that digital media offer unseen possibilities for the growth of knowledge and experiences to see ourselves live. As John Hartley (2012) described, media are 'enabling social technology' (Ibid. p. 7). I propose a reconfiguration of how we understand young people's intimate practices in social media environments to popular media practices. Intimate storytelling as a popular media practice perpetuates the argument in chapter one; young people's intimacies in social media are mediated productions of media authorship, rather than simple self-presentations of intimacies. Intimate storytelling as a popular media practice transgresses the powerful myth of the mediated centre; it makes us aware that social media profiles and communicative interactions on these media are created displays to others – to audiences (Livingstone, 2008; Manago, et al., 2008). Moreover, intimate storytelling, framed as a popular media practice, should make us aware that these intimacies are mediated through making use of media institutions, which are part of popular media culture (Ellison & boyd, 2013). Current intimate media cultures hamper emancipatory projects in two ways. First, they obstruct the growth of knowledge, which could provide young people with more diverse recourses for constructing their intimate identities. Second, they see popular culture as not being able to open up new pathways of knowledge creativity and intimate citizenships.

First, the growth of knowledge in intimate media cultures is hampered by obsessions in culture and society with 'authenticity', 'realness', and 'identity management.' Authenticity and realness are not neutral signifiers, but rely on societies hegemony; they continue normative constructions of selves and identities, rather than opening up any alternatives (Grazian, 2010). Identity management, currently culturally constructed as the new ethics when being online, is guided by state (e.g. control over who we are) and corporate interests (e.g. for creating marketing databases), but has little to do with our – and specifically

young people's – everyday lives online. In contradiction to what society puts forward as 'good' or 'decent' online behaviour, research on online intimacy and sexuality shows how digital media can stimulate new sorts of pleasures and growth of knowledge about sexuality and relationships (Schwarz, 2010), outside of the 'real'. However, rather than acknowledging these possibilities for young people, society emphasises dangers, reiterating long-standing moral panics about young people's sexualities (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Amy Adele Hasinoff (2013) recently concluded that for young people to benefit from the emancipatory possibilities of digital communications media in their intimate and sexual life-worlds, anonymity, communication, self-expression and pleasure are important features. Particularly, anonymity is what young people are being told to avoid in current intimate media cultures. However, as noted by several empirical contributions related to young people's online activities; anonymity has important advantages; researchers acknowledge anonymity as key to experiment in positive ways with multiple selves (Maczewski, 2002). Online spaces can help young people cultivate ideal selves, by trying them out in online spaces (Manago, 2013). Moreover, the research project of Malin Sveningsson Elm (2007, 2009) on Swedish teenagers' online life-worlds found how a lack of anonymity reinforced heteronormativity in young people's online spaces.

Second, intimate storytelling as a popular media practice is related to popular mass culture. The remediation of intimacy in SNSs is not something which should be seen as detached from 'old' media representations. As popular culture is all around, it is evidently an essential part of young people's self-representations. Here, I do not wish to argue, uncritically that popular culture is automatically a site for emancipation, rather, people making their own use of popular culture to produce self-representations is, undoubtedly, a site for creativity and fun, opening up new possibilities which were not common before (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008). Young people's self-representations are part of an emerging remix culture (Livingstone, 2008), in which recourses of popular culture are used to make them their own. For example, when young people imitate

'sexy poses' of favourite singers in their social media profiles, society reaches thoughtless conclusions on how young people's core selves are polluted by sexualised popular culture. The convergence of media forms (Jenkins, 2006) has intensified the hegemonic struggle between popular cultures' forces of domination and the totality of meanings that people may construct about popular mass culture (Fiske, 1989/2010). This intensified struggle can be seen as a step forwards to the democratisation of our popular media cultures.

Conclusion: Intimate citizenships and ethics in social media

The "I" is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence. This dispossession does not mean that we have lost the subjective ground for ethics.
> Judith Butler[30]

The nomadic vision of the subject as a time continuum and a collective assemblage implies a double commitment, on the one hand, to processes of change and, on the other, to a strong ethics of the ecosophical sense of community – of "our" being in this together. Our copresence, that is to say, the simultaneity of our being in the world together, sets the tune for the ethics of our interaction with both human and nonhuman others.
> Rosi Braidotti[31]

We have the ability to put our life at a distance – which opens the world up to intervention. Instead of attempting to reduce the plasticity of the real by hopelessly searching for a true self, people should embrace the co-creative nature of being, and take the responsibility for it.
> Mark Deuze[32]

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30   See Butler (2005, p. 8)

31   See Braidotti (2011, p. 210)

32   See Deuze (2012, p. 263)

People are together in the complex networks of digital communications media. Social media are not the spaces of particular media institutions, nor of specific audiences, or of a particular powerful centre. Digital communications media come alive through people's struggles and appropriations, that is, a myriad of media-related practices, which are partly related to the activities on screens, but also to practices in wider culture and society. For example, when we talk about how to live with social media, *we are all part of the unfolding intimate media cultures.*

If we are all part of intimate media cultures, we can think about how to live our intimacies with and in digital media, rather than allowing how we love, what we desire, our sexualities and genders to be defined by media institutions, audiences or social media pundits. Media ethics, as an open question of how to live with and in media (Couldry, Madianou, & Pinchevski, 2013) have become increasingly important, as digital communications media are inextricably intertwined with people's intimacies; an ethics of media 'needs to take care of life and its various incarnations' (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p. 172). In the current era of Facebook, Twitter and other social media applications that are dominating current social media markets, according to Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012), we ask the wrong questions:

> The key ethical question facing us in the era of Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks is therefore not whether we should be "on them," but rather how to emerge with social media, and how to become-different from them (2012, p. 172).

Specifically related to normative organisations of intimacy in mediatised youth cultures, heteronormativity achieves much of its intelligibility through current media ideologies. Becoming different from current intimate media cultures that are dominated by particular forms of discipline and control is acknowledging that the natures of our beings are intertwined with media, and not seeing our lives with media as something outside of the real. To become different from particular popular SNSs demands a more neutral ground to think about the ethics of young people's intimacies and social media; thinking about intimate

citizenships in mediatised societies could offer that neutral ground.

Intimate citizenship (Plummer, 1995, 2003) – defined as sexual citizenship by others (Weeks, 1998) – is a transgression of the private/public binary which has long been seen as essential to maintain intimacy. The transformations and democratisations of intimate life-worlds are a consequence of making gender and sexual issues public, which before were silenced. Intimate citizenships can be seen as making intimacy public, but simultaneously protecting the possibilities for things to remain private. The proliferation of intimate stories in culture and society has brought new individual rights and opportunities, but also new responsibilities, for which the 'I' should be approachable. Foremost, an intimate citizenship, should denote a plurality of multiple voices and should, to paraphrase Ken Plummer (2003), allow people with control (or no control), access (or no access) and socially grounded choices (or not) related to the body, feelings, relationships, representations, spaces, identities, genders and eroticisms (Ibid. p. 14). An intimate citizenship should 'support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity' (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 203). Intimate citizenships as lived in digital communications media may open up alternatives to heteronormative forms of living. They open up, in the words of Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, a queer world, 'Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to couple form, to property, or the nation' (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 199).

The proposed reorientations of the politics of intimate media cultures in society, from a demand for more control, regulation and management of these online spaces, to open questions of ethics and intimate citizenships, recognises that we live our intimacies in media (Deuze, 2012). This means we should understand we cannot clamp onto young people's intimate life-worlds any longer without understanding how a considerable number of intimate practices are media-related. This intense mediatisation of intimacy unfolds new hegemonic struggles, which some studies have only started to explore. However, as Livingstone not-

ed, given these evolutions in culture and society are so recent, it is probably too soon to understand what is exactly changing (or continuing) in young people's everyday life-worlds, because of the ubiquitous presence of social media (Livingstone, 2013). Recognising young people live their intimacies in media does not mean media should become invisible (Kubitschko & Knapp, 2012); an understanding of the articulations of mediation processes is vital to live a good life in media. A good life in media is one where we learn to question current media ideologies; *we are all part of the unfolding intimate media cultures.*

METHODOLOGY

Ontologies: Media, change and intimate stories as media practices

> Ontology is an assumption, not a testable hypothesis
> Jodi O'Brien[1]

If I want to study how media changes and transforms the everyday lives of people and how media anchors and orders particular practices of people, I might assume a powerful effect of media on culture and society, implying the use of a positivist research paradigm. However, I do not believe there is a whole way, or a single 'logic', in which media are influencing the intimate lives of young people, it needs to be emphasised that research can only grasp particular mediatised small life-worlds, as noted by Friedrich Krotz and Andreas Hepp (2011):

> Mediatized worlds are in our understanding mediatized, small life-worlds. As such, they are structured fragments of life worlds with a certain binding intersubjective knowledge inventory, with specific social practices and cultural thickenings. Mediatized worlds are the everyday concretization of media societies and media cultures (2011, p. 146).

I believe it is only through exploring these mediatised small life-worlds in-depth and drawing on sociocultural and critical qualitative commu-

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1   See O'Brien (1999, p. 2)

nication research methods (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011), we can understand how media changes everyday lives. Positivist approaches, which draw on the study of media effects, are not well suited to understand the complex workings of media in culture and society (Gauntlett, 2006; Ruddock, 2013). However, at the same time, the existence of media in society is not without its consequences. The impossibility to define a particular effect of the media, does not mean it is needless to put theoretical energy into understanding how media are modifying communicative actions and practices (Couldry, 2010), and what happens 'if societies and culture as a whole depend on specific media' (Krotz & Hepp, 2011, p. 141); media in this sense are co-constructing our realities. Explorations of small mediatised life-worlds always need to be contextualised within particular media contexts (e.g. specific social media websites and audiences) and specific practices.

My methodological path takes an *interpretative approach* to media practices of *intimate storytelling*, which I have defined in chapter two as the total nexus of embodied human actions that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships and desires, related to, or oriented around, media. Therefore, it is important to study not only interactive communication practices, but also communication to wider audiences. The conditions under which these stories are being told, and the media contexts as particular places of experience, are vital to interpret intimate stories as broad sense-making practices in and around social media. Interpretivism, as a qualitative communication research method (Arnett, 2007), is a social constructionist approach to understand the realities in which people live their everyday lives (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), focusing on shared cultural symbols and creating shared meanings. I combine this inductive reasoning with insights from more critical traditions that focus on power relations and deductive reasoning (Sergio, Elio, & Luigi, 2001). Combining sociocultural inductive reasoning with a critical deductive approach connects theory to the wider research practice. The critical deductive approach depends on heteronormative meanings as sensitising concepts (Goltz, 2009); heteronormativity was used

to suggest directions for where to look and what to see (Blumer, 1956). I have defined heteronormative meanings in chapter two as:

- beliefs of a *presumed* heterosexual desire
- a set of *rules* to conform hegemonic heterosexual standards
- a system of *binary gender*

Further, I feel it is important to mention the use of practice theory in relation to the study of practices which are mainly discursive (that is textual), in nature. First of all, a practice approach to media should not be conflated with the recent turn in social theory to non-representational theories (Thrift, 2008). How representational content gets embedded in the world is necessary to the study of media (Couldry, 2012, p. 31). Discursive practices are practices in which 'the world is meaningfully constructed' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 254). However, practice theory stresses that '"language exists only in (routinized) use": in discursive practices the participants ascribe, in a routinized way, certain meanings to certain objects (which thus become 'signs') to understand other objects, and above all, in order to do something' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 255). Consequently, practices are more than signs, which implies a difference between practical and discursive knowledge. This practical knowledge is what Shaun Moores (2012) describes as 'bodily know-how.' Although the empirical chapters of this dissertation will not invest in specifically researching this bodily know-how in-depth, these particular theoretical vocabularies and my attachments to these theories are important for the reader to become familiar with how I see social media as intertwined with young people's everyday lives. Moores (Ibid. p. 95) refers to Giddens, who argues that people have difficulties with a 'discursive consciousness'; people find it difficult to explain these pre-reflective doings (Giddens, 1985). Related to my own research, this became explicit when studying young social media audiences in focus groups (I will expound on this later in this chapter) and asking them about their social media use and habits. Anke, a fourteen year-old girl, explains to me her activities on the SNS Facebook, which she refers to as being *automatic*.

Anke: Err yes…I dunno…if I'm going on someone's profile, I go auto…,
           I mean, if I go on a prof…I click on a profile picture
           automatically. I don't know why…
Me: So, a profile picture?
Anke: Yes. But, I don't … You just do it, I don't know.

Anke, like many other participants, had difficulties explaining why she opened her SNS profile on her Internet browser and why she started clicking around randomly, sometimes spending a lot of time there as if she were a *flâneur* walking around a city. Joke, another fourteen year-old girl, makes a significant remark to the understanding of media practices as being partly pre-reflective doings and movements, when she refers to going on Facebook as a *reflex*-like activity combined with doing homework.

Joke: So yeah, I start with doing my homework, but if I do not have
           anything to do afterwards, it is a reflex to put on the computer
           and look at who is online [*laughs*], yeah…
Me: And if your computer is on, you directly go to social media
           [*Joke laughs and confirms*], Facebook or others?
Joke: It's a kind of reflex to open everything [*laughs*] and then, yeah…

These examples illustrate that meaning emerges out of practice.[2] My ontological position argues that, outside of representation, things can be meaningful. Nevertheless, many social actions, especially if they are media-related, are textual or could be viewed as texts (Ricœur, 1973); texts are the only evidences of sense-making practices (Mckee, 2003). Therefore, my interpretative approach, combined with critical theory (Tyson, 2006), has obvious connections with research traditions from the humanities such as literary theory (Culler, 2007), deconstructionism (Derrida, 1967/2003) and queer criticism (Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, & Bultereyst, 2008; Doty, 2000). Both deconstructionism and critical

2   I had the opportunity to exchange thoughts on the place of the discursive in media practices and cultural studies in October 2013 with Shaun Moores, who gave a lecture at the University of Antwerp on 'Digital orientations: "Ways of the hand" in media uses and other embodied practices'. This exchange has been inspirational while writing about my own ontological positionality. I would also like to thank colleague and friend, Kevin Smets, for organising this.

theory have improved critical ways of thinking about how experiences are determined by normative hegemony, which are built into sense-making practices. Dislocating this normative hegemony, as a research praxis, questions the solidity and stability of normative systems, which are essential to understand their workings in culture and society.

Nevertheless, obvious contradictions remain. Related to the study of intimate sexualities, gay and queer research, Ken Plummer (2005) argues tensions between critical humanist approaches that aim to re-construct the role of narrative, the self and identity within culture and society (Heaphy, 2007), and the deconstructivist approaches that rely on discontinuity, subjectivity and fragmentation, cannot be reconciled. As Plummer (2005) notes, this would not even be desirable: 'We have to live with the tensions, and awareness of them is important back-ground for the self-reflexive social researcher' (Ibid. p. 357). This re-flexive sociology (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Heaphy, 2007; Seidman & Nicholson, 1995), not to be confused with the sociology of reflexivity (Giddens, 1994),[3] recognises meta-narratives of change and the role of the individual and identity, while equally acknowledging and emphasis-ing the role of inequalities, difference and power.

Research contexts: The story of Netlog becoming 'Sletlog'

The conducted research for this project is situated within the project 'The Online Stage: Youth and Heteronormativity, Self-Representation and Identity Construction in Online Communication' (2010-2014), fi-nanced by the Special Research Fund (BOF), Ghent University. This research project formed the empirical basis for this dissertation.

Starting in 2010, this project aimed at inquiring Dutch speaking Belgium youths' most popular – in a quantitative sense – SNS environ-

3   The sociology of reflexivity is 'not reflexive in the sense of critical reflection on the dynamics of difference and power involved in the production of the sociological narrative. They do not explicitly explore the limits of the analysis in terms of whose realities are represented or made invisible and what interests of power are promoted (explicitly and inadvertently). They do not promote reflexive sociology because they seek, above all, theoretical and narrative coherence' (Heaphy, 2007, p. 178).

ment in depth. When the study started, the research reported that 66 percent of Flemish youths between 14 and 18 years-old had a profile page on the SNS Netlog, while 39.2 percent reported to have a profile page on Facebook, 25.8 percent on Habo, 1 percent on MySpace and 1 percent on Hyves (Jeugddienst & Jeugdwerknet, 2010).[4] Therefore, the research project proceeded with the study of teenagers' intimate storytelling practices in the context of Netlog, an SNS platform with a particular focus on young people, community building, getting to know new people within the network and an integration of brands to shape your own online identity. In a quantitative study on social media use in 2010, the majority of the Flemish teenagers reported (40 percent) that they engaged in Internet browsing and SNS for more than one hour a day. SNSs are mostly combined with using other media such as television, specifically by girls (Adriaens, Van Damme, & Courtois, 2011).[5] The Netlog context, such as Netlog's software design, will be discussed in more depth in the empirical chapters, but I will briefly situate Netlog and its use.

Interestingly, the years 2010 and 2011 became a turning point in Netlog's popularity, in which the social media website lost the majority of its members to Facebook. In 2012, only 22 percent logged into Netlog the month before this data was collected (Jeugddienst & Jeugdwerknet, 2012). Users of Netlog in 2012 were mostly represented by a younger demographic. There was a clear observable juncture in the decline of Netlog use when teenagers turned 15 years-old. At that age, they left Netlog for Facebook. Massive Media, the holding behind Netlog, underwent significant restructuring in the years 2011-2013. Strikingly, while at the beginning of 2010, Netlog was still the European market leader with more than 67 million users, by the end of 2010, newspapers reported that Netlog had lost the battle against Facebook (Deckmyn, 2010). Netlog was marketed as a social media website aimed at young teen-

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4   These quantitative research reports are published every two years by the Flemish Network for Youth Movements (Jeugddienst en Jeugdnetwerk). The reports contain results from a large-scale quantitative survey into the new media use of Flemish teenagers. This research is executed in collaboration with the research group for Media and ICT (MICT) at Ghent University. The reports can be found online: http://www.apestaartjaren.be/onderzoek/apestaartjaren-5.

5   Non-access to social media is very low in Flanders, as 99 percent were reported to have a computer at home with Internet connection in 2012 (Jeugddienst & Jeugdwerknet, 2012). However, the social media divide should not be ignored, as a recent study conducted in the U.S. reported that non-adoption of social media is associated with 'less economic stability, more fractured educational trajectories and weaker support from parents and friends' (Bobkowski & Smith, 2013).

agers until 2011, but the concept was changed to create the social discovery platform[6] Twoo, a social media-dating website aimed at matching people. The Twoo platform was integrated with Netlog to transfer as many users as possible from Netlog to Twoo. Netlog (www.netlog.com) still exists today as a 'community website where users can maintain and broaden their social network' (Netlog, n.d.). However, Massive Media has chosen not to invest any longer in the Netlog platform for the European market.[7] Recently, Twoo was sold to Meetic, a French corporation owning the majority of dating websites in the world (De Ridder, 2013a).

The empirical research of this dissertation is situated within a period where a significant shift in the social media use of Dutch speaking Belgium teenagers took place. While Netlog was constructed around community building within the network, popularity, anonymous nicknames and colourful designs, a cultural shift in the politics of social media platforms from connecting and community building to monetising connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) became a problem for Netlog. Netlog's revenue model, which was constructed around a 'popular' integration of brands,[8] no longer fitted with social media cultures that were increasingly being constructed around authentic self-promotion, real-name cultures, and business-like designs; these features were marketed and offered by competitor Facebook, which after 2011, dominated young people's social media use in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. As I have reported in an earlier published working paper (De Ridder, 2012), young people quickly left Netlog because of social media's network effect; you want to be where your friends are. More importantly, powerful media ideologies (see theoretical chapter three), that is, ideas about Netlog as an online place, and people's related activities on Netlog, were constructed in Flemish youth cultures as dangerous, low-class and sexualised, as I noticed during my research project. During my search for

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6   A social discovery platform is a particular social media platform aimed at matching people through technology. This matching can be done through particular information users provide the platform with (as I explained in chapter two), but can also be based on 'location-based social discovery', in which smartphone applications use the users' location to connect with other nearby users.

7   As I was told when interviewing the assistant community manager (Eveline Vermaesen, Interview conducted 12th of December 2012 at the Netlog headquarters Ghent, Belgium) of Netlog, Netlog is still popular in some Arabic countries.

8   For example, profile owners had the possibility of laying-out their profile, choosing a design, which was made for them by a particular soda brand, car, or music festival, etc.

participants for the Netlog study, I asked youngsters to write down why they did not have a Netlog, which illustrated the power of media ideologies and intimate media cultures related to the use of particular social media (De Ridder, 2012):

> I don't think it is necessary to have. Because of privacy, it is not safe (Girl, 16 y.o.).
> Netlog is for sluts and playboys (Boy, 16 y.o.).
> I deleted it; too many false accounts, old dirty men and little kids, and it is boring. (Girl, 15 y.o.).

Netlog has become a place associated with fear for strangers in audience discourses (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013). However, Belgium is a low risk country compared to other European countries, in terms of possible harm associated with Internet and social media use (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). Moreover, Netlog took many initiatives to protect young people on the website (De Ridder, 2013a). Consequently, the rational ground for these dangers associated with Netlog can be questioned. Foremost, Netlog was seen as a place for sluts; Netlog was nicknamed 'Sletlog' (in Dutch, meaning 'Slutlog') among young teenagers. The 'Sletlog' discourse is a powerful illustration of the workings of intimate media cultures. Referring to my articulation model (see Figure 1), I argue that the workings of intimate media cultures are exposed through understanding the workings of processes of subjectivity, participation, technology and regimes of representation. The processes become meaningful in articulation with particular sense-making practices of Netlog about their platform (marketing, revenue model, and software design), and audiences about their own and other people's activities. Last, moral panics in culture and society on the risks related to young people's digital media use. These processes, actors and beliefs in culture and society have constructed intimate media cultures related to Netlog in particular ways, but they have also become powerful in young people's own intimate storytelling practices in the Northern Belgium context.

Research aim and methods

The empirical chapters of this dissertation are aimed at exploring the social and cultural organisation of intimate stories, which are young people's sexualities, genders, relationships and desires, as media-related practices on SNSs. The coherency between the presented empirical chapters is structured around the articulation model I presented in theoretical chapter two of this dissertation (see Figure 1). The empirical chapters are assembled around the processes of subjectivity, participation, technology and representation, in articulation around audiences and media institutions as significant actors. The empirical chapters interpret specific practices such as exploring how young people use the *opportunity structures for participation* to tell their intimate stories on an SNS as *self-representations*. Or, exploring how a popular SNS shapes people's stories through *designing software*, which are *appropriated* in specific ways. Other than exploring these specific practices on SNSs, two chapters (see Table 2 – empirical chapters four and five) draw on social media as places for young people to experience sexualities, gender, relationships and desires. These chapters explore the way young people make sense of media cultures when interpreting intimate stories, or how media cultures in everyday life may shape young people's own intimate storytelling practices.

To explore intimate storytelling as media-related practices on SNSs, heterogeneous research methods are necessary; often referred to as a mixed-method approach (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009). This dissertation used a number of qualitative communication research methods such as a participatory observation on a popular SNS, focus group interviews with young social media users, contextual data such as documents (e.g. popular press articles and terms of services of Netlog) and expert interviewing. I will shortly introduce my use and why I have chosen for these specific methods, combined with the procedures for data gathering and data analysis. However, I would like to refer to the empirical chapters, which contain more in-depth explanations of the methods used to analyse the specific materials.

Participatory observation

Participant observation is a specific ethnographic method that I used to familiarise myself with young people's storytelling practices on the SNS Netlog. For example, familiarising me with the specific use of language and words was an important aspect of the participatory observation. Being on Netlog among the people I studied, immersed me in experiences necessary to make sense of the data I wanted to analyse. My goal was to describe and interpret the observable relationships between social practices and systems of meaning in the particular setting of Netlog (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011, p. 134). Ethnographic approaches to study online environments have become widely adopted, sometimes also being referred to as 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2010). Specifically related to social media, ethnographic approaches have been used to study environments such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook (Giglietto, Rossi, & Bennato, 2012). For this particular participatory observation, I created a profile on Netlog in November 2010, identifying myself as a 25 year-old male researcher from Ghent. Further, to obtain consent from the people I studied, I collaborated with a group of twelve trained students, who attended a practical research seminar in communication sciences at Ghent University (2010-2011).[9] We visited schools, youth movements, leisure clubs and other organisations to explain our research[10] to teenagers, including what kind of data we would use, to guarantee that these young people's privacy would be respected. If they agreed to participate, participants were asked to 'friend' the profile on Netlog,[11] so they would have the means to decide whether to agree with the terms of the research. It is important to note that in some groups we contacted, a dynamic unfolded in which no one wanted to participate, while in other groups, everyone would be willing to participate. Friending young participants for a study on SNSs demands careful ethical management and a continuous

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9   Students participating in this practical research seminar were Bonte Thibault, De Nutte Melanie, De Vuyst, Sara, Depaepe Nele, Deploey Laura, Desmet Justine, Lesage Bie, Spriet Kimberly, Vandorpe Lou, Vanhoutteghem Arne, Verdonck and Miet.

10 We specifically targeted young people attending secondary schooling, usually between 13 and 18 years-old in Belgium.

11 The notion of 'friend' on social media means a wide diversity of social relationships and not so much the traditional notion of friendship (Robards, 2013).

balancing act. The research practice of 'lurking', where participants are studied in their online environments without their knowledge, is something I wanted to avoid at any cost, as a premise of 'ethical commitment' (Ringrose, 2011). Reflecting on the research practice of friending young participants in social media, Brady Robards (2013, p. 224) argues that we must realise 'these spaces are, for many users, at least partially private, evidenced by the strategic ways in which young people's online social networks are largely made up of people they already know' (Ibid. p. 224). Further, he notes, SNSs are not places like any other, as they contain an archive of people's activities and pictures. Further, I think we should be careful, especially with young people, not to treat their social media activities as 'open laboratories' (Giglietto, et al., 2012). Whether these data are used for in-depth qualitative studies or for collecting big data sets in automated ways (boyd & Crawford, 2012), the ethics of such research practices are questionable. Within this project, my primary interest was in the mediated context of Netlog as a place for mediatised experiences of intimacy, rather than choosing to observe young people's intimate life-worlds online as a fast and affordable method for data collection.

Eventually, in November 2010, my Netlog profile contained 200 connections with teenagers between 13 and 18 years-old. I maintained this profile for 18 months, although within this community, I was never a true insider, rather an *observer-as-participant*. This means I 'primarily invested in observing group members but may still interact with them casually, occasionally, and indirectly' (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011, p. 147). For example, some participants would wish me a happy birthday, Netlog notified them about this, to which I responded politely, but I did not initiate direct communication with the participants. Further, I avoided tracking people's behaviour through long-term observations for privacy reasons. I organised two moments were I collected and archived data in offline databases, which were used for in-depth textual analysis. This web-archiving is a method for 'stabilizing and preserving the ever-changing Internet as an object of empirical research' (Lomborg, 2012, p. 80); the archives fixed the content on Netlog at a certain point

in time, making it an analytically researchable object. The first data collection focused on interpreting static produced intimate stories as media practices on Netlog, through making sense of the appropriations of the software design, self-introductory texts, nicknames and pictures. The second data collection focused on intimate stories as media practices of *communicative interaction*, through analysing comments on popular profile pictures. I will shortly introduce the methods and procedures.

The first data collection was done in November and December 2010, through archiving visual snapshots of 200 profiles. The analysis started with a quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004), using statistical software SPSS 20, of the particular uses of the Netlog software design. In addition, the quantitative content analysis provided a standardised comparison of references in nicknames, pictures and self-introductory texts to intimacy. This quantitative content analysis was used to add information to the qualitative textual analysis, but also to structure the data. I reported on this quantitative content analysis extensively in a published working paper (De Ridder, 2013b). The qualitative textual analysis coded and structured the nicknames, self-introductory texts and pictures as themes, using a thematic textual analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). I refer to Appendix 1 (on the attached CD-R to this dissertation) to consult the archived database containing 200 profiles, the SPSS database, the working paper containing the quantitative content analysis and the thematic textual analysis of nicknames, self-introductory texts and pictures.

Second, I archived data from the Netlog research profile in October 2011, saving the comments that I found under the 10 most popular profile pictures. In total, 812 comments were saved. These comments were often conversations between people, which allowed analysis of communicative interactions between participants. I used textual analysis, combined with critical theory methods to explore meaning-making practices on sexuality, gender, relationships and desires. I refer to Appendix 2 (on the attached CD-R to this dissertation) to consult the archived comments and the textual analysis of the comments.

Focus group interviews

This project organised eight focus groups (N=51) with teenagers between 13 and 19 years-old (Puchta & Potter, 2004). Although the focus groups talked with young people about their general social media use, the goal was to get to know more about their reflections on intimate storytelling practices of peers, as well as their own intimate storytelling practices. Last, I focused on SNSs as spaces to experience gender, sexuality, relationships and desires. Focus groups were used to generate diverse opinions and discussions about the topics, but more importantly, I was interested in the collaborative processes of meaning construction, related to the youth and media cultures of SNSs (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011, p. 138). Focus groups took place in informal settings in which I avoided to take any authoritative position as an academic researcher (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). For the interviews, I chose places the participants were usually familiar with. I made sure the conversations would not take place at the university, but in a youth club, at one of the participant's homes or at their school.

The participants for these focus groups were recruited through accessing gatekeepers that could access small groups of young people (e.g. schools, scouting and sport clubs). Therefore, I collaborated with a group of eight trained students, who attended a practical research seminar in communication sciences at Ghent University (2011-2012). Except for one, the focus groups were conducted by me, as the principal interviewer moderating the conversation; I refer to Table 1 for an overview. The assistants helped with some practical issues during the focus groups such as keeping an eye on the time (usually, the focus groups lasted around 80 minutes). Most importantly, assistants noted non-verbal cues and wrote their impressions about the focus group as observers afterwards. The focus groups made use of a semi-structured interview protocol, which was pre-tested and adapted several times together with the students collaborating in this research. Before each focus group, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (a drop-off) containing questions about their demographics and social media use. The inter-

view protocol made use of particular strategies to deal with more sensitive research topics in focus groups. The structure was thought about at length, starting with easy to answer opening questions, a transition to familiarise participants with each other and finishing with the more sensitive core questions (Mortelmans, 2009). Some questions made use of vignette techniques (Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010), which are based on asking participants about hypothetical situations, rather than asking direct questions; I refer to empirical chapter four, for more in-depth discussion about vignette techniques. Further, I used two pictures of self-representations to initiate discussions on gender norms. The focus groups were transcribed verbatim. The interview data was coded using software for qualitative research (QSR NVivo 10). Using the guidelines of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the coding was repeated several times. Eventually, the coding consisting of 61 codes in total, was structured into four main categories and different sub-categories. These four main categories focus on social media as a place in everyday life, general social media practices in everyday life, intimate media-related practices in social media and media cultural complexities in social media (e.g. popularity, authenticity, celebrification, …).

In terms of the epistemology of the conducted interviews, I often had the feeling participants would continuously perform what was expected as 'good', 'authentic' and 'normal' online behaviour, rather than tell about their actual social media practices. Moreover, they would strongly condemn 'bad' online behaviour, often giving numerous spontaneous examples. Therefore, in the analysis, I took into account that it was not possible to say anything about the *actual experiences* of young people's social media use in everyday life. Rather, I exposed the power of intimate media cultures, related to the use of SNSs in a particular youth culture. However, at moments, I could see how these intimate media cultures may affect their own intimate storytelling practices in everyday life. Nevertheless, taking such conclusions would demand more in-depth interviews with individuals exploring these findings further. The challenge in the analysis was the move beyond the continuously constructed

authenticity and realness when participants presented themselves in these focus groups, as Nick J. Fock and Pam Alldred (2013) noted:

> The methodological challenge is to move beyond the interpretations of respondents, who may have only limited awareness of the relations, affects and assemblages that produce their actions, feelings, desires and understandings, and are shriven of any inherent validity based on their purported "authenticity" (2013, p. 10).

I refer to Appendix 3 (on the CD-R attached to this dissertation), where the transcribed focus groups, an overview of the participants, the interview protocols, the NVivo file containing the coding structure, and a general summary of the coding analysis and the coding structure can be consulted.

TABLE 1.   OVERVIEW OF THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

FG	Date	Respondents	Female/Male	Age	Interviewer/Assistant
1	16 November 2011	8	5 female 3 male	14-18	Sander De Ridder/ Sarah Van Droogenbroeck
2	16 November 2011	6	5 female 1 male	14-16	Sander De Ridder/ Sophie Van der Sypt
3	20 November 2011	7	3 female 4 male	13-17	Sander De Ridder/ Babette Divivier
4	20 November 2011	5	5 female 0 male	14-18	Sander De Ridder/ Jana Dalle
5	27 November 2011	6	5 female 0 male	15	Sander De Ridder/ Ruben Feys
6	29 November 2011	8	5 female 3 male	16-17	Sander De Ridder/ Klaas Evers
7	30 November 2011	6	2 female 4 male	15-18	Kaat Bouten/ -
8	25 February 2012	5	2 female 3 male	15-19	Sander De Ridder/ Annamaria Csenki
N=8		N=51	33 female 18 male	13-19	

Contextual data

During this research project, some important contextual data was gathered, which was used to contextualise and deepen some research findings in the participatory observations and focus groups. Contextual information was usually not analysed in such a structured way, as is the case for the participatory observations and focus groups. First, I collected documents on the SNS Netlog, such as the procedure to log into the website, Netlog's terms of services and privacy statement. Further, I collected most of the popular press articles that were written about Netlog through consulting the Mediargus database (www.mediaargus. be) of the Flemish press. In total, 125 news articles about Netlog, published between 2006 and 2012, were consulted. Moreover, as I worked as an intern for a marketing agency before my PhD, of which Netlog was a client, I had access to some internal presentations from Netlog to possible advertisers. Last, I visited the Netlog headquarters three times during this project. At first, people working at Netlog were very hesitant to talk to me. Later, I learned this was because Netlog went through a very difficult period in 2010-2012, losing most of their visitors and advertisers and making most of their staff redundant. However, on the twelfth of December 2012, I was finally able to interview Eveline Vermaesen, Assistant Community Director at Netlog and Twoo, who has been working at Netlog from the early stages. This interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. I refer to Appendix 4 (attached on the CD-R to this dissertation) to consult these contextual documents.

Introducing the empirical chapters

This dissertation consists of five empirical chapters, which are published in peer-reviewed journals, or revised and resubmitted for publication. The articles provide empirical illustrations to the main research question of this dissertation; how have specific digital means for communicative

interaction and intimate media cultures become significant in the social and cultural organisation of young people's sexualities, genders, relationships and desires. Therefore, these chapters are constructed around the actors, processes and practices I introduced in the theoretical chapters (see Figure 1). Further, the articles provide insights into not only the emerging intimate media cultures, but also how they may become significant in young people's everyday lives. For a detailed overview of the different empirical chapters, methods and co-authorship, I refer to Table 2.

TABLE 2.   OVERVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS, METHODS AND CO-AUTHORSHIP

| EMPIRICAL CHAPTERS | METHODS | | |
	Participatory Observation	Focus Groups	Contextual Data
1* **Youth and Intimate Citizenship in Media Cultures:** Gender, Sexuality, Relationships, and Desire as Media Practices in Social Networking Sites	Textual analysis of nicknames, pictures and self-introductory texts.		Documents collected on the SNS Netlog.
2 **Are Digital Media Institutions Shaping Youth's Intimate Stories? Strategies and Tactics in the Social Networking Site Netlog**	Quantitative content analysis focusing on the use of software, textual analysis of self-introductory texts.	Analysis focusing on the coding in the category 'social media as a places in everyday life'.	Documents collected on the SNS Netlog, popular press articles, interview with Eveline Vermaesen.
3* **Commenting on Pictures: Teens Negotiating Gender and Sexualities on Social Networking Sites**	Critical textual analysis of 812 communicative interactions on the SNS Netlog.		
4* **Constructing the Gay Teenager in Times of Mediatization: Youth's Reflections on Intimate Storytelling, Queer Shame and Realness in Popular Social Media Places**		Analysis focussing on the coding in the category 'intimate practices in social media' and the sub-category 'gay sexual identities'.	
5 **Social Networking Sites and Mediatized Intimacies in Youth Cultures: New Regimes of Control**		Analysis focussing on the coding in the category 'intimate practices in social media' and 'media cultural complexities in social media'.	

* These chapters are co-authored with my supervisor Sofie Van Bauwel

A note on representing young people's intimacies:
Taking a reflexive position

> The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay.
> Gayatri Chakravotry Spivak[12]

I was confronted with numerous difficulties during this research: Managing a rather large amount of qualitative data, weighing up which examples I would use to provide some illustrations to my theories and creating transparency into my used methods for analysis were all rather challenging. However, taking the authoritative position to represent young people's intimacies and online life-worlds from the perspective of a young gay man employed as an academic researcher is by no means a neutral subject position (Best, 2007). For example, my own memories about growing up gay and my proximity towards these subjects and concerns about gay youth today shaped my particular interest in doing a specific case study on the 'mediatised' complexities related to social media and growing up gay. Because I found young people's discourses on homosexuality surprisingly harsh, I want to not only report about these concerns, but also contribute to the deeper understandings and expose the complexities of the discourses existing in current youth cultures on the use of homosexual language (McCormack, 2012; Pascoe, 2007). Moreover, being a gay man, I felt the need to provide alternatives to the numerous female feminist researchers, studying girls at risk in social media environments. However, my idea that young girls and (social) media are over studied seemed an observation shared by scholars with very different subject positions; I remember attending a lecture of highly acclaimed feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti, addressing the male audience with a powerful voice: 'Men, go out and start studying yourself!'

Further, the use of examples in the empirical chapters, such as illustrations of young people's conversations, self-introductory texts,

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12   See Spivak (1993, p. 181)

nicknames and quotes from the focus groups are not representative representations of young intimate live-worlds as lived in social media. Rather, they offer moments of insights in small mediatised life-worlds. Choosing particular examples was done with great care, but was always the result of particular choices. Moreover, for practical reasons, all these materials are translated into the English language. Most of the original materials were in Dutch, or mixed languages such as Dutch and English (see theoretical chapter three), and made use of dialect words. Consequently, a number of these original meanings are lost through the translation to make them clearer for an international academic audience. In addition, I decided not to incorporate examples of young people's visual self-representations in the empirical chapters, such as profile pictures. I felt uncomfortable with sharing young people's personal profile pictures, even when I could have obtained the permission to do so.

Youth and intimate citizenship in media cultures: Gender, sexuality, relationships, and desire as media practices in social networking sites

Abstract

This paper investigates how young people give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships, and desire in the popular social networking site (SNS) Netlog. In arguing how SNSs are important spaces for intimate politics, the extent to which Netlog is a space that allows a democratic contestation of intimate stories and a voicing of difference is questioned. These intimate stories should be understood as self-representational media practices; young people make sense of their intimate stories in SNSs through media cultures. Media cultures reflect how audiences and SNS institutions make sense of intimacy. This paper concludes that intimate stories as media practices in the SNS Netlog are structured around creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, and bricolage. The intimate storytelling practices focusing on creativity, anonymity, and bricolage are particularly significant for democratic contestation and diversity of intimacy to proliferate.

Keywords

Reference

De Ridder, S., Van Bauwel, S. (revised and resubmitted). Intimate citizenships in digital media cultures: Youth, storytelling and intimate politics in social networking sites. *COMMUNICATIONS: THE EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION*.

Introduction

Relying on tendencies of late modernity, such as the transformation of intimacy (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992), sociologists of sexuality have documented how our personal intimate lives have become increasingly intertwined with the public arena (Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 1998). Ken Plummer (ibid.) talks about increasing 'intimate troubles,' which give rise to new ethical dilemmas. Ethnographic research on young people's digital media use in relation to intimacy (Ito, et al., 2010, p. 147) argues how these forms of online self-expression 'are characterized by more casual and personal forms of public communication.' Our study is based on the conclusion that the boundaries between private and public intimacy are blurred; 'teens are part of a significant shift in how intimate communication and relationships are structured, expressed, and publicized' (Ibid.). As young people have the opportunities to self-mediate their intimacies to possibly large audiences who can only be imagined (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011), new emerging rights and responsibilities come to the forefront in making decisions about controlling and accessing such intimate self-representations, but also making choices about how to give shape to eroticisms, sexual and gender identities in these specific mediated places (Plummer, 1995, p. 151); an intimate citizenship should be understood as 'a cluster of emerging concerns over the rights to choose what we do with our genders, eroticisms; bodies, feelings, identities and our representations' (Plummer, 1995, p. 7). Such complexities have become prominent in the

everyday lives of young teenagers, often leading to societal moral panics related to sexuality and technology (Thiel-Stern, 2009). In response to seeing such intimate citizenships in SNSs played out at the level of media practices (Couldry, 2010) that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships, and desires, this paper investigates how young people tell these intimate stories in a particular popular SNS.

Our central argument revolves around the observation that social media are spaces for an intense intimate politics to proliferate in the everyday lives of young people; defining *politics* here as 'the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9). SNSs could be seen as spaces for reflexive intimate storytelling in need of a democratic equity—a space for intimate politics that recognizes differences, and where 'contestation for cultural narratives can take place without domination' (Benhabib, 2002, p. 8). Exposing the complexity behind the reflexivity of intimate storytelling demands an attention for the structures and normative frameworks regulating intimacy in everyday life, such as heteronormativity (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers & Carver, 2008; Santore, 2011). Further, and maybe more importantly, attention is needed for the intimate stories that are kept silent.

Drawing on critical social constructionist, feminist and queer criticisms on gender, sexuality, and desire, we will first discuss how many of the current studies are situated in the incorporation/resistance paradigm; seeing young people as producing intimacies in SNSs as incorporated by dominant ideologies, or rather resisting them (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Although these insights are of primary importance, current research does not inquire into how the mediated and mediatized (Hepp, 2012) online context of SNSs structures intimate stories. Moreover, it does not answer the question of how this relates to the potential of SNSs as democratic spaces for conflict and diversity. Therefore, we will contextualize the produced intimate stories as media productions (Hasinoff, 2013), investigating the politics of transforming intimacy into symbolic content. A transformative process in which au-

diences and media institutions are important actors (De Ridder, 2013; Silverstone, 2002). We will argue how intimate storytelling practices are shaped through making sense of *media cultures*, defined by Nick Couldry as 'collections of sense-making practices whose main resources of meaning are media' (Couldry, 2012, p. 160). This paper relies on a thematic analysis in tandem with a grounded theoretical approach (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to young people's intimate stories found on profile pages (N200) produced on the SNS Netlog. We argue how the intimate stories, as media practices, in our study were structured around negotiations of creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, and bricolage. Eventually, we will conclude how this is relevant to understanding the intimate citizenships and young people's everyday intimate lives in current media cultures.

Coming to terms with gender, sexuality, and desire in social media

During the last decade, an extensive amount of scholarship has been produced around how people use SNSs. According to Sonia Livingstone, 'it seems that the academy has kept pace with market innovation and social practice' (Livingstone, 2008, p. 395). In particular, the social and cultural organization of gender, sexuality, and desire have received much attention focused on SNSs as spaces for identity construction and performance (boyd, 2007; Buckingham, 2007; Livingstone, 2008) and as a form of a public display of sociality (Baym & boyd, 2012; Ellison & boyd, 2013). As technological media of communication between young people, SNSs are understood as spaces offering democratic opportunities for participation. Young people can create alternatives to mass media produced content and 'regimes of representation' (Hall, 1997); however, certain risks and increased complexities exist. Understanding how SNS technologies shape young people's performances and socialities, the concept of *affordances* is used to argue how technology frames people's

uses, but does not completely determines it (Hutchby, 2001; Schäfer, 2011). Livingstone concludes that the analysis of what people are doing in social media 'should acknowledge young people's experiences, and it should situate their social networking practices within an account of the changing conditions of childhood and youth' (Livingstone, 2008, p. 396).

Arguments specifically related to young people's socially mediated public performances of gender, sexuality, and desire are situated around processes of subjectivity, representation, participation, and technology, and the different conclusions often conflict (see Dobson, 2012, p. 373). Most inquiries show how specifically young girls, and to a lesser extent boys (Manago, 2013; Siibak, 2010), are subjected to the wider sexualization of (popular) culture (Attwood, 2009). The practice of performing gender, sexuality, and desire in social media is understood as a form of self-objectification (Gill, 2007). Reframing social media as 'technologies of sexiness' (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010), in which being 'sexy' is the norm (Ringrose, 2011a), the research concludes that the performances in social media are largely built around the stereotypical, heterosexualized, and commoditized norms that young people (mostly girls) have internalized (Ringrose, 2011b; Sveningsson, 2009). In contrast, some see how SNSs are a platform for performative transgressions of heteronormativity (van Doorn, 2009); whereas others find evidence for subversions, but also continuations and reinforcements of heteronormativity at the same time (Gómez, 2011). Looking at the subjectivities that young people are producing in their SNSs profiles as representations, draws a complex and chaotic picture that oscillates between a strong resilience on essentialist, heteronormative identity constructions and an increased agency that can subvert gender, sexuality, and desire, as they are usually played out in popular mainstream media and everyday life. Moreover, research drawing on the concept of *participation* complicates the picture even more, as it celebrates the increased opportunity structures of participation. For example, Anita Harris (2008) argues the conventional citizen positions of young women are empowered in online cultures. In addition, marginalized youth are often seen as appropriating technology as a form of democratic participation; such as

framing 'coming video's' of LGBTs as 'rhetorical action' (Alexander & Losh, 2010).

Notwithstanding, all of these results and conclusions offer valuable insights on how young people live their intimacies in online life worlds, and social media in particular. They fail to understand how these media become powerful in young people's intimacies. The insights discussed previously are continuations of what has been understood as the incorporation/resistance paradigm in audience research (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Longhurst, 2007). Relying on Marxist models of the distribution of power, that paradigm questions 'whether audience members are incorporated into the dominant ideology by their participation in media activity or whether, to the contrary, they are resistant to that incorporation' (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 15). Much of the research on young people's intimacies in social media understands that these intimate practices are either constrained by textual representations, such as those from popular culture, or, are resisting them. Amy Adele Hasinoff (2013) has recently argued for a stronger media theory that rethinks social media and sexuality as a form of media production and authorship to deal with complex and heavily laden debates, such as the practice of 'sexting' (see Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Indeed, when coming to terms with gender, sexuality, and desire in social media, we argue that two things are necessary to push insights forward: first, a clearer understanding of the role of technology and the connected affordances, and, second, a clearer ontological and epistemological account of what it means to live intimacy with social media. In sum, we argue for rethinking intimacy as a form of media practice (Couldry, 2010).

Although the technology is deemed important in most of the research; researchers tend to focus solely on technological structures, such as the 'networked nature' (Papacharissi, 2011). Whereas technological structures and the material conditions should be seen as the basics of the mediation process (Van Loon, 2008), technologies are also discursive and should be situated culturally (Carpentier, 2011; Morley, 2007). Even more so, how technological processes become powerful

through media institutions creating particular software designs and platforms is often ignored. Therefore, it is necessary to understand both how SNSs are made and how they become meaningful to the audiences using them. Second, to understand what it means 'to live intimacy with social media,' a well-defined practice of what people are doing with media is essential. The social practice of producing media in SNSs could be understood as a particular performance in which we *represent* ourselves and our connections of 'friends.' This practice should not be equaled to a performance or presentation of self. Self-representation is different as it involves 'the mediation of textual object' (Thumim, 2012, p. 6). Most research on SNSs is rather unclear about this. Spectacularzing and entertaining an audience are therefore essential features of this audience practice (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Further, self-representation involves understanding the specific politics and symbolic powers of mediation processes. Moreover, the mediation institutions are important actors to consider. The way intimacy in social media is the mediation of a textual object is not well developed in most of the research on people's online life worlds drawing on gender, sexuality, and desire. Although an interactionist theory of performance and self-presentation offers important insights (Goffman, 1959), it does not say anything about the technological context of mediation in which intimacy is lived in everyday life through using social media websites. Moreover, it is insufficient to understand how the wider process of mediatization (Hepp, 2012) has transformed the practice of intimate storytelling to a truly media-related practice.

Intimate storytelling as a media practice:
Media culture as context

Going beyond the incorporation/resistance paradigm in which gender, sexuality, and desire in digital media such as SNSs is often understood, we argue that media culture should be taken as the primary context for

a more complex understanding of how an intimate citizenship in digital media cultures can proliferate. Mediation is in its very essence a transformative process from lived reality into symbolic content (Silverstone, 2002) in which media institutions and audiences are the primary actors (De Ridder, 2013); the power of SNSs in the shaping of intimacy is in how these mediating actors become meaningful in relation to the practice of intimate storytelling. This process has been conceptualized as the mediatization of culture and society (Hepp, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to understand how young audiences make sense of online sociality in SNSs as part of their everyday lives, but also, how SNSs, as media institutions, attach meaning to (intimate) socialities. Therefore, young people's intimate stories as self-representations should be understood and contextualized within these wider processes of meaning making. In what follows, we will elaborate on how audiences make sense of SNSs in their everyday lives, and also how SNS institutions make sense of intimate socialities when creating platforms for communicative interaction.

Young audiences making sense of SNSs in their everyday (intimate) lives

In the early days of the Internet, self-representations of gender, sexuality, and desire were thought of as being in continuous fluid (re)construction (Baym, 2010), which was eroding normative and rigid organizations of intimate identities (Harrison, 2010). These more utopian perspectives gave rise to dystopian answers, which argue that norms were not reinvented (and sometimes even reinforced) online. Consequently, this greatly influenced the incorporation/resistance paradigm in which much research on young people's intimacies in SNSs situates itself today. However, recent audience research drawing on the role of digital communications media in the everyday (intimate) lives of young people, has contributed significantly to our understandings beyond these oppositions (Pascoe, 2011).

In an investigation of how teens live and learn with new media in various settings, C. J. Pascoe argues 'romance practices are central to teens' social world, culture, and use of new media.' Using digital media is seen as rendering intimate practices 'simultaneously more public and more private' (Ito, et al., 2010, p. 145). As research shows, young people seem to consider these online spaces as important for their performances of intimacy, and thus are continuously balancing the public and private status of what they are sharing and publicizing. For example, intimate relationships and their maintenance are important to make public, while it is also known that in these media environments, talk about intimacies is more explicit (Ibid.). Young social media audiences claim that these intimate stories are 'markers of social success and popularity, as they elicit compliments and result in a higher tally of friends' (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013, p. 108). Therefore SNSs are a 'commoditized environment' based on the logics of a 'celebritized popular culture' (Ibid.). Indeed, not all self-representation should therefore be understood as a personal and meaningful self-disclosure (Livingstone, 2008; Thumim, 2012); young audiences argue that they aim to portray themselves in a positive light (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013). Consequently, intimate storytelling as a self-representational media practice is about performing, spectacularizing, and entertaining, in which creativity, aesthetics, and popular culture are important.

Contradictory to audiences making sense of self-representation as a creative public exposure in which popularity is significant; privacy, authenticity, coherence, and realness are recognized as very important at the same time. Although young people recognize anonymity as facilitative to 'expressing themselves openly' (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013), they emphasize how self-representations should be as closely connected as possible with who you are 'in real life' (Van Cleemput, 2008). Often, pictures are important media tools to judge whether people 'are authentic or not' (Livingstone, 2008, p. 403). Pictures are understood as signaling 'the real me' and an embodied coherent identity (Mallan, 2009). The conflictuality between expressing the self through performing/spectacularizing/entertaining and promoting a real/authentic/coherent

self is how young audiences currently understand self-representation in SNSs. Consequently, these ideas may become powerful in shaping intimate storytelling practices. Further, these ideologies for making sense of self-representation are not only played out at the level of the audience, but are also inextricably intertwined with how SNS institutions make sense of (intimate) socialities.

SNSs institutions making sense of (intimate) socialities

Internet applications have a history if we look at how they have offered people ways to represent themselves in stages, from anonymous homepages and databases to current complex platforms for interaction that steer users in invisible ways by collecting (meta)data, using complex algorithms. (van Dijck, 2013a). Software platforms of SNSs are built around market and cultural powers that structure peoples activities, self-representations, and ideas on online sociality (De Ridder, 2013). SNSs have become an integral part of our media cultures, and they contribute to the sense making of the intimate storytelling practices in everyday life; this observation is much more complex than defining affordances around pure technological networked structures. Recently, José Van Dijck (2013a) argued how social media have transformed into institutions, 'monetizing connectivity' by gathering data about their users, whereas social media used to be designed around interactive communities facilitating connectedness between people. Moreover, users have adapted to this changing logic by turning self-expression into continuous self-promotion, narrative, and storytelling: 'Following the examples of celebrities' self-promotion, many users (especially young adults and teenagers) shape their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness' (van Dijck, 2013b, p. 203).

As a consequence of structuring self-representational practices of users around the culture of connectivity, scholars have criticized SNSs as narrow tools for performing identities and intimacies. Self-promotion

demands identity management, fixing a fragmented self (van Zoonen, 2013). Representing identity as a narrative is often based on normative demands for coherence, intelligibility, and recognition (Cover, 2012). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler (1990/2006) on performativity and citationality, feminist and queer critics argue how self-representations are shaped into narrow subjectivities (Van House, 2011). Social media are promoting the ideology of having one transparent self and identity (van Dijck, 2013b).

Intimate stories as media practices are shaped by media culture: how audiences and institutions make sense of self-representation. Conflictualities between market powers of SNSs, cultural powers, and audiences' tactics give rise to a complex structuring of intimate stories and the mediatization of intimacy in the everyday lives of young people. Important to consider is how this connects to an intimate citizenship in SNSs. How do these media cultures and the structuring of intimate stories relate to democratic voicing possibilities and diversity? In addition, how do they connect to the social and cultural organization of sexuality, gender, relationships, and desire? In the empirical section, we will structure our analyses of young people's intimate stories on the SNS Netlog, and how they are situated around creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, and bricolage.

Method

The intimate stories of young people we have investigated have to be contextualized within the region of Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. We analyzed the intimate stories on the SNS Netlog (www.netlog.be), because it appeared to be the most popular among teenagers when we started the research in November 2010; 74 percent of Flemish teens had an account on Netlog.[1]

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1   The data were provided by a research report called 'Apestaartjaren,' which is published every two years by the Flemish Network for Youth Movements (Jeugddienst en Jeugdnetwerk). The 2010 and 2012 reports can be found at: http://www.apestaartjaren.be/node/585.

Data collection

To collect the data, one of the authors created a profile on the SNS Netlog. In November 2010, schools and youth movements were contacted, and we invited youngsters to 'friend' the research page on Netlog. The position of the researcher was not invisible, but it was made explicit when asking youngsters to join the research page on Netlog. This was also repeated on the profile itself.[2] Recruiting youngsters in their offline life worlds provided them with maximum control over their participation in this study; they had to actively negotiate and add the research profile. This research praxis was not only a choice of empirical rigor but also mostly one of Internet-research ethics. Reflecting over the researcher-participant relationships when doing research with young people on SNSs, Brady Robards (Robards, 2013) argues for a continuous reflexive research position, as SNSs blur the public/private dichotomy. Important is that we did not focus on young people's intimacies while treating these websites as simple 'information repositories.' Rather, the specific mediated context in which these stories were situated is the primary object of our study. Further, we adapted the nicknames in this study to avoid any reference to the original persons.

Data analysis

For this study, we captured the data of 200 profiles of youngsters between 13 and 18 years of age, focusing on nicknames, self-introductory texts, and pictures. Although we had a wider variety of data available, we chose to proceed with this specific data to focus in-depth on those self-representational stories that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships, and desire.[3] The process of interpreting the meanings in these texts and images was based on a thematic analysis (Guest, et

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2   On the profile page, the researcher was clearly identified. Further, the research was explained as an inquiry into active users of social media between 14 and 18 years of age. It clearly stated that privacy would be respected, and the researcher's e-mail address was provided if any of the participants had further questions.

3   This research is part of a larger project on youth, heteronormativity, and self-representation in social media. These profiles were collected during an 18-month participatory observation in the SNS Netlog, and they have been saved in an offline database. We refer to a more extensive research report in which we combined quantitative content analysis on these profiles, as well as a descriptive exploration of young people's intimacies (De Ridder, 2012).

al., 2012), combined with a critical grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Within these nicknames, self-introductory texts, pictures, and themes were exposed inductively. Further, we contextualized these themes with critical sensitizing concepts organized around the concept of heteronormativity (Goltz, 2009). Therefore, we looked at how discursive constructions evolved around binary identity categories (e.g., male/female, masculine/feminine, straight/gay, single/in a relationship), but we also explored stereotyping and resistant practices to heteronormativity. Moreover, we related the themes to their mediated and mediatized contexts, such as exploring the use of popular music lyrics, texts of movie quotes, identifying themes, and so on.

Intimate storytelling in the social networking site Netlog

The SNS Netlog has particular market strategies (De Ridder, 2013). Most importantly, the website is targeted specifically at a younger age group (14–24), and it is built around getting to know new people, instead of only maintaining a network of friends; they emphasize community building rather than being structured only into a closed network. Therefore, the website is more 'fun' and 'entertaining' than authentic and real-name designs, such as Facebook. Netlog allows users to choose anonymous nicknames and, moreover, the website offers more creative features, such as choosing the color palette of your profile. Netlog's communication tools are personal self-representation features (pictures with rating functions, videos, a blog, self-introductory texts, general profile layout, personal events calendar, etc.), tools for interpersonal communication (sending personal messages) and communication with the larger connected network (comments on pictures and videos, a guestbook, etc.). Further in this section, we structured the results around the mediated and mediatzed context of telling intimate stories in Netlog, which are creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, and bricolage.

Creativity

Self-introductory texts seemed to be the most important space on Netlog to tell intimate stories; this was often a carefully produced creative practice. Those texts were often written using a lot of emoticons (graphical representations, such as hearts) and a mixing of languages, such as Dutch, English, and French. Intimate stories seemed to be about the personal as well as the interpersonal. To produce intimate identities from a personal perspective, youngsters mostly wrote about love and sexual identities. A small number of both boys and girls made references to sexual and erotic pleasures, writing about experiences in suggestive ways. Interestingly, youngsters preferred to use the free spaces of textual self-introductions to make their sexual identities clear, rather than using the predefined software inventories:

> Love Status: Single Ladie'sZz** *(:p)*
> (Boy, 17)[4]

Making a sexual preference in self-introductory texts clear in a rather explicit way is a practice we observed by heterosexual boys, which fits within how a hegemonic masculinity is maintained through the production of a clearly defined heterosexual identity (Connell, 2005). In addition, young people identifying themselves as gay or lesbian used self-introductory texts to make sexual identities quite clear. Interestingly, using these free textual spaces to introduce sexual identity illustrates how not much emphasis is put on 'being gay'; it is just part—among other things—of everyday life:

> *Anna.*
> *.17.*
> *.Piercing: 2 Dermals.*
> *Gay.*
> *. Saxophone.*
> (Girl, 17)

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4   For practical reasons all texts were translated from Dutch to English. We refer to the gender and age of the profile owner under each quote.

Girls' stories were not so much about making a sexual identity clear,[5] but rather emphasized their creativity (citing poems, lyrics, etc.) to compose texts that represented them as loving, emotional, but also empowered, as shown in the example, being strong and able to cope with a lost love:

> If a give up, this does not mean I am weak, but that I am strong enough to let go.
> (Girl, 16)

Stories that focused more on the interpersonal connected the self to others by telling stories about loved ones. For the most part, this was done through telling about shared memories in long and extended texts, whereas the others briefly communicated about their relationship status, accompanied by emoticons such as hearts. In this way, the Netlog page was used to institutionalize relationships, making them public to the audience (Ito, et al., 2010), often accompanied by the date both lovers got together. On a considerable number of profiles, these texts were written by the person to whom the story was connected with. The youngsters called this specific practice 'breaking in.' Breaking in is an intimate practice that goes beyond the text, as it is an illustration of sharing each other's passwords that are needed to login to the Netlog profile. The following illustration was written by the boyfriend of a fourteen-year-old girl:

> Hi darling, I'm going to start with breaking in and all this tralala. . . .
> Because everyone is doing it. . . . No TM.AMB.ABV
> Whatever darling ♥ you are the best girl, I'm so happy that I've known you for so long. Yes Yes, it's almost a year girl! I don't wanna lose you anymore. Don't you know what you mean to me? You are fucking everything to me, you are always there for me (folks, I'm also there for her!!) [. . .].
> (Girl, 14)

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5   As we will discuss further, girls that identified as lesbian are an important exception; they often made their sexual identities very clear in self-introductory texts.

The way the cited text addresses the audiences, makes clear how intimate stories on Netlog are carefully produced while thinking of all those who will read it. Intimate stories in self-introductory texts seem to continuously transgress the very personal and intimate to the public; moreover, the stories are produced within masculinity and femininity subjectivities. However, girls particularly show creativity in appropriating a wide range of media practices, creating their own stories, which are often strong, submissive, and lustful at the same time (Kearney, 2006). These forms of creativity show how young girls negotiate objectifying media portrayals. More specific as a media practice, young people appropriated the software designs in creative ways. They developed specific tactics (De Ridder, 2013) by sharing passwords, which are normally used to authenticate one unique profile owner. Further, they ignored closed software inventories in the benefit of making their self-expressions of their intimate identities their own.

Anonymity

Facebook, the most popular SNS worldwide, supports an online real-name culture (van Dijck, 2013b). However, anonymity is an important element of online communication. As mentioned before, young people argue that anonymity helps them to express themselves openly. Moreover, anonymity has proven beneficial for people to 'connect with communities and romantic partners, find information, and gain confidence'; while educators and media literacy campaigns have refuted anonymity for the online protection of children (Hasinoff, 2013, p. 7). Netlog's specific affordances allow users to use anonymous nicknames as self-representations. In the Netlog community, nicknames are important, as they function as primary markers of identification to navigate through the website. Consequently, nicknames could be seen as the most important signals of identity (Baym, 2010, p. 109). An important number of nicknames reflect personal identities; thereby, the forename was used and adapted to make it a 'unique' signaling of identity. Next to using

the nickname as a personal signaling of identity, social identities were also used to identify the self with other groups, such as gendered identities, ethnicity, and sexual identities. We argue that the creative process of using anonymous nicknames opened up Netlog as a place for a more reflexive play with difference and power. Gendered identities referenced in the nickname reflect conventional male and female gender characteristics, such as fashion (*fashionshiousxXxEllen*) and football (*jordi_voetballer*), whereas ethnic identities, such as *MAGREBB_united*, communicated a sense of belonging. Further, one girl identified herself as a lesbian in her nickname, using *G_Star_Pot* (In Dutch, *Pot* is a slang word for lesbian corresponding with *dyke*.). The use of social identities in nicknames reflects the importance of identity politics that young people use to make strategic identity claims whereby they become clearly recognizable within a majority that is heterosexual and white. The use of identity politics shows how teenagers have knowledge on the dynamics of 'othering' (Mainsah, 2011). A number of youngsters specifically referred to intimate desires by presenting themselves in a nickname as attractive, sexy, and loving. Further, relationships were also made public, using nicknames that connected the self to a lover by using both lovers' names (e.g., *EliineAndSplentr*). As nicknames are the primary markers of identification in the online space of Netlog, the status of intimate stories is immediately made clear; they are very much present and an important way of representing the self to others. More so than using 'real names,' anonymous nicknames offered more complex negotiations for identification.

Authenticity

While anonymity opened up a more reflexive play of difference and power, pictures as self-representations are known to authenticate people's online profiles. Pictures are important forms of storytelling (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011) that centralize the importance of embodiment in relation to intimate storytelling. Although pictures did not seem to be

as popular as texts to tell intimate stories, a considerable number of youngsters in the sample produced intimate narratives through photography. Most frequently, pictures showed intimate relationships between a boy and a girl, holding each other and kissing. Further, some girls took pictures representing them as attractive and sexual, showing a fragmented body, and often using close-ups while gazing into the camera. Notably, pictures were produced in creative ways, often adapted to soften the colors, adding symbols such as hearts and making banners with a collection of pictures for the profile. Pictures seemed to be important, as they are supporting the intimate stories found in the self-introductory texts discussed earlier. Thereby, these visual representations reproduced the dominant cultural significations of femininity, masculinity, and especially heterosexuality. Further, the body seemed to be an important signifier that became materialized (Butler, 1993) through the discourses found in the intimate texts. Particularly, the strong focus on representing heterosexual intimacies is a clear materialization of the textual discourses on intimacy. Being in love, intimacy, and sexuality were repeatedly inscribed on a particular kinds of bodies, carefully produced in the pictures of boys and girls kissing. Materialization is important for the wider intimate politics in Netlog, as it is the very process through which difference and sexual pluralism is threatened. There was an obvious symbolic annihilation of visual representations in pictures of same sex intimacies, this in strong contrast with heterosexual intimacy. Intimate storytelling as a media practice in Netlog can therefore be seen as subjected to the norms circulating in Western media cultures, where gay and lesbian identities are represented according to a 'double standard' (Streitmatter, 2009). Although having a gay and lesbian identity is allowed, practicing intimacy through pictures does not seem evident.

Performativity

At the basis of 'performativity' are a number of repetitious activities based on norms that are unconsciously reproduced. In social media

such as Netlog, performativity is a useful concept to describe the sociotechnical configurations in which intimate storytelling takes place (van Doorn, 2009). In this section, we will argue that the politics of intimacy in Netlog are constructed through the process of reiteration that is a linked to Netlog as a commercial media institute, and the media practice of intimate storytelling. First, it is important to acknowledge the market powers and current conditions of popular SNSs as media institutions wanting people to produce stories. They are not spaces where all self-representations are meaningful, but rather where participation and creating content yourself becomes a condition to be allowed in the wider sociability the network offers (Thumim, 2012). In this respect, we noticed how intimate stories are, rather than original stories, citations of each other; intimate storytelling in Netlog is a collective act continuously re-reproduced. The introduced 'breaking in texts' (cf. supra) showed through the example how this specific intimate storytelling practice came into being; 'Because everyone does it. . . .' Second, this very process is how intimate storytelling as a social practice becomes normative within the network. Intimate storytelling as a media practice is produced according to a vast set of rules and normative structures to be intelligible.

The following example is a text on the profile of a fifteen-year-old boy, writing to his girlfriend. The text represents how intimate stories in Netlog are constructed through strong emotions:

> I would never have thought that I would ever say this, but you make my dreams come true, a lot of people say forever with you, with you I have this feeling. When this would be the case, I would be the most happy boy on earth. I will love you forever and you are who you are, nobody is perfect.
> (Boy, 15)

This story concentrates itself on 'feeling,' 'happiness,' 'dreaming,' and 'be yourself.' This text is just one example of the many intimate stories that focus on reiterations of emotions that strongly connect to norms and values about intimacy, such as 'faithfulness,' 'authenticity,' 'having a relationship forever,' and 'honesty.' Interestingly, the emotions are more

than inner feelings and cognitive utterances; the performativity constructs an emotional politics through which subjectivities are produced (Ahmed, 2004). Further, the emotional discursive is also materialized into the bodies represented in the pictures that support these intimate discourses. The mediation of emotions is the use of an intensive emotional discourse connected to values and norms on love and intimacy. However, this very performativity of how intimate stories should be told among young people in Netlog leaves room for transgressions, because of the shift to living emotions with such intensity, not in private but in popular public spaces. The ambiguity of the discourse on love and friendship is one example; love and friendship become hard to distinguish. The following quotation was written as 'breaking in text,' and it represents a friendship between two girls:

> Do you know you are the most important person in my live? I do not think anyone knows me better. You taught me to talk about my feelings [. . .].
> (Girl, 14)

Although this 'queering of friendships' through intimate stories was exclusively a practice of girls, boys also engaged in communicating about strong emotions, thereby redefining hegemonic masculinity. However, an important refinement is how boys' transgressions are characterized by heterosexual recuperations (McCormack, 2012), which means that they tended to only show emotions within clear heterosexual borders. Boys made use of intimate storytelling almost exclusively in relation to their girlfriends, or when making it clear that they were searching for a girl.

Bricolage

Intimate self-representations are embedded within popular culture. Intimate storytelling as a media practice introduces an intertextual self, a self that appropriates the discourses and aesthetics popular cul-

ture provides to create a story. In other words, popular cultures are the resources to make sense of self-representations. This particular media practice of bricolage has been seen as a principal component of digital culture, in which the bricoleur's activities 'should not be confused with boundless freedom and endless creativity' (Deuze, 2006, p. 71). Specifically dominated by the Anglophonic commodity markets, such as the music, film, and celebrity industry, Western popular media cultures played an important role in our Netlog sample. On the profile of a 15-year-old girl, we found two pictures were she represented herself in an attractive and sexy way. While looking at the camera, she poses by touching her hair and pursing her lips. Next to these two pictures, she posted a video clip of the popular R&B singer 'Zion,' featuring the rapper 'Akon.' The video shows how a girl walks through a sunny and busy street. Because of her sexy poses and walk, she gets the attention and admiring looks of all the young and old men she passes by. The example characterizes how the media literacy of how to pose in an intimate way is attached to pleasure, to appropriate popular cultural texts as recourses. The girl in our sample clearly copied the moves found in the video clip. Likewise, when looking at the wider sample, the pictures showing intimate relationships between two people were not spontaneous pictures but rather were carefully produced, often taken of the couple in close-up, with suitable perspective chosen, the colors changed to black and white, or their image framed within popular media aesthetics.

Lyrics from popular songs and quotes from movies were also widely used to produce intimate stories. Youngsters appropriated these texts, complementing the text by adding symbols such as hearts; adapting the gender of the artist that sings the song so that the song would fit in their own self-representations; and mixing Dutch sentences with the English lyrics. Songs such as 'In Love with You Forever,' by the American Idol finalist Eliot Yamin and 'As I Am,' from the well-known teenage star Hannah Montana, are just two meaningful examples. The very values that are communicated within the songs, such as faithfulness and authenticity in these cases agrees with the wider themes we found in the intimate stories that focused so strongly on emotions. However, these

quotes and songs are not always clear citations from the 'original' but rather are embedded within a specific subcultural practice of telling intimate stories in social media profiles. We found that many of the texts, such as poems and love declarations, came from other websites, and more specific blogs, such as 'Engelse zinnen <3' (In Dutch, meaning 'I love English sentences') and 'Lovegirls.' Specially used and operated by girls, these community blogs and websites were built around the most beautiful SMS messages from boyfriends, the most romantic quotes, and so on. This commodification of intimacy is in fact a process of 're-commodification,' that is how products of the media cultural industries become appropriated and mixed by teenagers who develop their own style in these blogs, websites, and SNS profiles (Brown, 2007). Bricolage is an essential element in the sense-making practices of young people, to produce intimate stories, but it should not be equated with a resistance to what popular culture provides. However, popular culture offers scripts (that is normative and resistant scripts) to talk about intimacies (Van Damme & Biltereyst, 2012). Acknowledging bricolage as inextricably intertwined with intimate storytelling as a media practice opens up SNSs as spaces that offer cultural reimaginations for intimacies.

Conclusion: Media cultures and intimate citizenships

In young people's everyday lives, intimacies are intertwined with media; private lives have become public dialogues, giving rise to new intimate troubles and ethical dilemmas. An intimate citizenship has become increasingly connected to young people's media cultures; new rights and responsibilities to tell intimate stories are intertwined with making sense of their genders, sexualities, relationships, and desires through media. Because SNSs are important spaces for an intimate politics to proliferate, we have investigated whether a popular SNS provides young people with a space for contestation and recognition of difference, and our study has been based on their own intimate stories

as self-representational media practices. Defining these complexities as emerging concerns over an intimate citizenship, insights in what people can do with their genders, eroticisms, bodies, feelings, identities, and representations in these online spaces are of primary importance.

Choices about what young people can do with their intimacies in social media are not only limited by the social and cultural organization of intimacy, but also are structured around ideas of how young audiences make sense of SNSs in their everyday lives, and how SNS institutions define their market and cultural powers by creating software platforms. Netlog as a case study was relevant, as it is, opposed to current ideas about online authenticity, fixed identities, and real-name cultures, built around fun, entertainment, popularity, and building a community. The Netlog case study showed how anonymity offers more complex negotiations for identity. Being creative and appropriating the software design in particular ways opened up the space for more contestation and creativity around the symbolic production of intimacy. Moreover, using popular culture to create intimate stories offers young people experiences with cultural reimaginations. However, the Netlog space is also structured around performative repetition and a strong materialization of heterosexual intimacy.

The politics of transforming intimacy into symbolic content in social media are complex. Current media cultures related to social media use tend to continuously search for realness and authenticity, whereas our research showed how anonymity, creativity, and bricolage opened up Nelog as a diverse space for contestation. Young people who produce their stories in an entertaining and spectacularizing way 'may facilitate media critique, creativity, and self-reflection' (Hasinoff, 2013, p. 9). Rather than focusing on intimacy produced in SNSs as presentations of self or self-presentations, the suggestion to rethink young people's intimacies as self-representational media practices opens up new ways of looking. Moreover, transgressing the incorporation/resistance paradigm for an understanding of how young people's intimate stories are connected to current media cultures offers insights into the mediatization of intimacy, and how media become powerful and interwoven into

the intimate practices of young people. Future research should further explore how audiences and media institutions make sense of intimacy in social media so that we may understand the true possibilities for an intimate citizenship by choice, to emerge in everyday media spaces.

Are digital media institutions shaping youth's intimate stories?
Strategies and tactics in the social networking site Netlog

Abstract

Drawing on a participatory observation in the popular social networking site (SNS) Netlog among Northern Belgium youngsters, this paper offers insights on how SNS institutions can be understood as actors that order storytelling practices in everyday life. Specifically, this paper deals with intimate storytelling practices that give meaning to sexuality, gender and relationships, developing a feminist and queer political critique on SNSs' focus on the production of intelligible intimate identities and endless performative flows of stories. Theoretically, this paper proposes to put central everyday media-related practices to understand SNSs as actors shaping intimate stories, dialectically brought in relation to the website's political economies and the cultural powers through which software is designed. Empirical illustrations show how de Certeau's concept of tactics is useful to expose a complex struggle between digital media institutions power and everyday appropriations.

Keywords

Intimate Storytelling, Media Practice, Netlog, Queer/Feminist Critique, Social Media Institutions, Youth.

Reference

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Introduction

In reporting on a fascinating three-year ethnographic inquiry into the new media practices of youth in the United States (Ito, et al., 2010), it is stated that new media are heavilyused for 'intimate interactions'. It is argued that 'Young people are at the forefront of developing, using, reworking, and incorporating new media into their dating practices in ways that might be unknown, unfamiliar and sometimes scary to adults'. Intimacies have, especially for youngsters, become a habitual digital media practice creating intensive mediated sociabilities that set out challenges for the socio-cultural shaping of gender and sexual identities and the normative frameworks through which they are shaped. Researching the late modern 'transformations of sexuality' in young Swedish life worlds, Johansson (2007, p. 118) acknowledges that 'the Internet has clearly become part of everyday life and sexuality'. Although a wide range of digital media practices are taking place in Western youth cultures, I will proceed by taking intimate storytelling in popular social networking sites (SNSs) as my particular object of inquiry. Approaching intimate storytelling as a reflexive everyday life practice, the concern here will be with all those stories - which could be referred to as self-representations in social media - that give meaning to the sexual, the gendered and the relational (Plummer, 1995). In social media, however, intimate stories typically become practices of interactive audiences as they are *mediated* through particular software platforms that are more than merely *intermediators* (van Dijck, 2012; Van Loon, 2008), but rather *institutions* holding symbolic powers that shape

intimate stories (Silverstone, 2002). Consequently, focusing on a particular case study, I will reflect on how social media institutions shape the intimate stories of young people. Acknowledging the importance of SNSs as *particular places* in the everyday life worlds of teenagers, this paper departs from an ethico-political perspective that strives for the proliferation of a radical pluralism of sexualities, genders and relationships within popular mediated spaces (Weeks, 2010). Therefore, the infrastructures and software designs of SNSs will be questioned as media technologies *ordering* intimate media practices.

Gender, sexuality and the intimate lives of young people online have been researched quite extensively (Gómez, 2011; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Siibak, 2010; Sveningsson, 2007, 2009), as well as the more broad social interactions on SNSs. However, as van Dijck (2012) recently argued, mostly only human actors are taken into account, whereas the wider technological and software architectural aspects are often ignored in theoretical reflections, and even more so in empirical inquiries. The goal here will be to better understand a specific current lack in social and cultural accounts of Internet media; that is 'the power of the algorithm' (Beer, 2009), or how the software of SNSs shapes the social and cultural formations in everyday lives (Couldry, 2012, p. 37). Therefore, I will take into account not only the political economies (Fenton, 2007), but also how the platform operates within the cultural and normative frameworks of intimacy. However, as the focus will be on youth's digital media practices, the economic and cultural design *strategies* that SNSs use will be considered in relation to how people appropriate these media in particular settings and moments, thereby exposing the everyday life resistant *tactics* and subversive pleasures typically related to popular media culture environments (de Certeau, 1984/2003; Fiske, 1989/2010). Theoretically, this paper is situated within those cultural media studies that focus on the ordinary and habitual everyday life practices, particularly in relation to the popular, but also as developed in the Internet studies of Bakardjieva (Bakardjieva, 2005, 2010). I will use a *multi-layered* approach, as proposed by van Dijck (2012), to better understand the role of the platform

in youth's intimate stories, which combines a techno-socio-cultural approach with political-economic insights. The techno-socio-cultural approach will build on feminist and queer critiques on technology and human-computer interaction (HCI) (Cover, 2012; Light, 2011; Van House, 2011; Wajcman, 2010), while I relate political economies to critical perspectives on the opportunity structures for users to participate in social media platforms (Andrejevic, 2011; Carpentier, 2011b; Fuchs, 2011). As SNSs are mediated places where intensive intimate interactions are taking place, my concern is with what Light (2011) describes as 'apolitical design' that reinforces a 'status quo'. An apoliticial design refers to a definition of 'the political' as understood by Chantal Mouffe (2005). She argues how the political should be seen as a place of conflict necessary for democracy where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted in societies, which is equally important in social media places. Accepting a 'radical pluralistic' vision of intimacies and sexualities, we should question environments that leave no room for political negotiations of gender, sexualities and heteronormativities, as well as a broad recognition of difference.

I will begin by reflecting on how the concept of mediation can be useful for analysing audience practices on SNSs. Particularly focusing on the relevance of understanding what popular social media institutions do, I will conceptualise what the market and cultural powers in relation to SNSs are. Further, this will be related to how interactive audiences are working with market and cultural powers in everyday life. Illustrating the proposed approach, a particular case study of the SNS Netlog will be developed within a particular Northern Belgian context. Taking a multi-layered approach seriously, a participatory observation of the profiles of 200 youngsters (13-18 years old) will be contextualised with a profound document analysis, an interview with Netlog's Assistant Community Director and focus groups on social media use and intimate practices with 51 youngsters.

Intimate storytelling as mediated practice

Looking at the intimate self-representational stories of youngsters, it has already been shown how gender and sexual norms are not reinvented online, but are rather reproduced in different online social interactions. In particular, self-representational practices such as written self-introductory texts and pictures on social media exemplify how masculinity and femininity are mostly represented using stereotypical gender binaries (Manago, et al., 2008). Moreover, non-heterosexual identities are not always highly valued in networked publics, especially among young people (Sveningsson, 2007). Although these heteronormative identity constructions are not particularly more observable online than in offline interactions, the mediation process that is typical for digital and interactive media creates a transformative *media flow*, which Couldry (2008: 380) defines as 'flows of production, circulation, interpretation or reception, and recirculation, as interpretations flow back into production or outwards into general social and cultural life'. Moreover, the transformative aspect of interactive digital media is particularly intense because of the large extent to which young people have access to social media, the everyday basis in which they interact with these platforms, and the large appropriation of media tools such as pictures, texts and videos (Baym & boyd, 2012). Further, a mediation process is a transformative process in the sense that certain *institutions* are important *actors* that make this process possible (Silverstone, 2002). Consequently, this power in the shaping of current intimacies in youth culture by mostly large and commercial media institutions (such as MySpace, Facebook and, in this particular case, Netlog) has become important to understand in relation to particular media practices.

Focusing on the institutional context in which intimate stories on SNSs are shaped demands particular attention towards the transformative and non-linear mediation process. Particularly in relation to social media, I argue that four processes can be seen as working together in continuous articulation, ultimately creating a mediated discursive place to tell, share, build and comment on intimate stories (De Ridder, 2013).

Obviously, (1) technology and (2) participation are important processes here, but also are (3) subjectivity and (4) representation. Firstly, *technology* can be seen as an ordering that provides material structures, which is the very 'essence' of the mediation process (Van Loon, 2008, p. 8). Although technology is shaped within culture (Morley, 2007), it is material in its consequences (Hutchby, 2001). Connected to technology, the notion of 'affordance' helps to differentiate between the very 'material aspects that determine the design of the product' and the 'ultimate design of the product' (Schäfer, 2011, p. 9). Affordances are the material aspects *and* design choices. This differentiation is important on SNSs, as the networked technology of the Internet and software are material aspects that are designed in specific ways. These design choices are not neutral, but depend on the designers who shape them and the larger institutional infrastructures they are created in (Taylor, 2003). Secondly, *participation* is highly dependent on technology; in particular, the networked structure of the Internet plays a vital role in the intensive mediation of intimate stories. Participation is in itself, as Carpentier (2011a) describes, a site of ideological and democratic struggle: affordances make some opportunities to participate possible, while excluding others. Thirdly, the process of *subjectivity* makes clear how the mediation process depends on broader social and cultural norms. For example, it should be acknowledged that software design operates in 'highly standardized formats for identity expression' (Livingstone, 2009, p. 9), as software designers go for 'optimal' and 'efficient' designs, thereby relying on social and cultural norms (Light, 2011). Fourthly, *representation* is the very process through which these subject positions are distributed and in which the symbolic power of the mediation process situates itself (Hall, 1997). Representation is the process through which all these intimate stories that are told, shared and liked eventually become meaningful to people. The workings of representation are important in social media's intensive media flow, as it is through the interpretations of the represented intimate stories that they flow quickly back into other reproductions, outwards into social and cultural life.

Having defined the mediation process as a complex non-linear

transformative process that relies on the complexities of technology, participation, subjectivity and representation, I want to continue by further investigating how current popular SNS platforms contribute to shaping the social and cultural formations of intimacies in everyday lives by focusing separately on market and cultural powers, and how this relates to a political project that strives for a pluralistic presence of intimacies in popular social media places.

Market powers

Market powers have a complex role in how social media platforms shape the socio-cultural, and more specific, intimate stories. Exposing how market powers shape the intimate stories of interactive audiences demands an understanding of what Beer (2009) describes as 'the performative infrastructures' of the website. Thus, a primordial element is exposing the economics, or simply how social websites make money in relation to the options and opportunities audiences have to interact with the website. In general, this critical, political economy analysis of SNSs (see particularly Andrejevic, 2011; Castells, 2009; Fuchs, 2011) explains how 'economic dynamics of production structure public discourse by promoting certain cultural forms over others' (Fenton, 2007, p. 13). Overall, social media heavily promote the cultural form of being social through endless online *connecting and sharing* (Freedman, 2012; van Dijck, 2013), reinforcing the late modern transformation of intimacies that are gradually becoming more open and connected to public realms, instead of being exclusively private (Plummer, 2003). When people create content on social media, it is widely acknowledged that not all of these stories are well thought out and original, as 'in order to participate in online socializing here, people must represent themselves. Thus self-representation is a condition of participation in this online space' (Thumim, 2012, p. 138). Moreover, users of SNSs do not only provide meaningful content, but also valuable data for advertisers, as social

media gather metadata for commercial interest (van Dijck, 2012). As Terranova (2000) bluntly puts it, people are 'netslaves' who produce content for free, serving the digital economy.

The social and cultural implications of these economic logics of digital media could be seen as *intensively performative:* 'a medium that is an active participant in a political dialogue. It is political in its iterability; it performs, over and over, passing as/with information' (Rowe & Myers, 2012, p. 59). As a lot of the stories young people tell are dealing with intimacies, sexualities, relationships and gender (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013), this intensive reiteration process within a software architecture that demands a constant doing of intimacies brings new challenges for the 'troubling politics' of heteronormativity. How does this intensive producing of intimate stories relate to a project that aims for sexual pluralism? Does such an online place leave room for disturbing and accepting alternative identities other than those within a heteronormativity that seeks continuous normative coherence between a 'natural' sex, gender and desire? The economic logics behind SNSs that demands continuous connecting, sharing and storytelling in order to be allowed into the wider online sociability has become an important part of the everyday repetitious citations of what we understand culturally as intimacy.

Cultural powers

Next to a general concern with how today's intensive cultures of connecting, sharing and storytelling are linked to how youngsters come to understand intimacy today, the software designs themselves that make up these websites are not without meaning either. On SNSs, the concepts of 'participation' and 'agency' are contestable as these environments are not neutral (Carpentier, 2011a; van Dijck, 2009), but merely offer interactions with tools that stabilise identities, offering pre-defined options (e.g. the male/female categories, relationship status, etc.). According to Cover (2012), SNSs are concentrated on 'coherence',

'intelligibility' and 'recognition', and offer software inventories that are concentrated around 'heavily politised identity categories'. From more critical feminist (Rubin, 1984/1993) and queer theoretical perspectives (Butler, 1990/2006; Jagose, 2009) that plea for an anti-normative and anti-identitarian project, SNSs are problematic 'fixing tools par excellence'. Feminist critiques on HCI argue that software templates shape the information that people provide (Van House, 2011). These affordances leave little room for political flexibility in which norms can shift instead of being continuously reproduced. This strict identity management is not only observable in relation to popular SNSs, but in a wide range of commercial and governmental organisations (van Zoonen, 2013).

My argument here returns to the notion of performativity. SNSs tend to be strong in *citing* the same drop-down menus over and over again, which eventually creates the discourses they name (Chambers & Carver, 2008). In current culture, they create the organisations of intimacies, such as in the cases of relationship statuses, sexual preferences and so on. These created inventories provide a neo-liberal idea of choice, promoting 'simplified discourses articulating only the most limited normative choices' (Cover, 2012, p. 182). Consequently, the cultural powers of the platform lie within the *materialisation* of how intimate identities are organised; in relation to gender and sexuality these cultural signs provided by the platform are creating the appearance of an intimate subject in a particular online place. Software platforms are created by the choices of the designers who shape them; however, they are also embedded within 'a tangled mix of individual personalities, organizational structures, design imperatives, and economic considerations' (Taylor, 2003, p. 26). In developing a critical theory of technology and more specifically the Internet, Feenberg (1999, p. 174) argues that 'media design is shaped by the hegemonic interests of the society it serves'. The software of social media and SNS platforms in particular need to be understood as meaningful cultural templates (Rettberg, 2009). Consequently, those platforms an sich make sense of intimacy most evidently by shaping software designs in particular ways. Moreover, they also order the meaning of people's own intimate stories.

Both market and cultural powers are strongly connected and, ultimately, they close down options to tell intimate stories in everyday life, which I referred to earlier as 'apolitical' designs. From within this critical perspective, it is argued that an important outcome of self-representation in popular SNSs is that we only come to 'imagine ourselves through the means of mediated self-expression' (Fenton, 2012, p. 140). The flow of capital - which surrounds mediated intimate storytelling interactions through social media institutions, and which is central in the workings of market and cultural powers - designs these websites as *useful objects*. They are useful objects in the sense that these websites are not built around the creativity of people or their intimacies in the everyday, but rather on rational choices that enable profit. In this way, they become useful for different stakeholders, such as advertisers, which desire to target specific groups of audiences constructed around hegemonic identities such as male or female, straight or gay.

Everyday life tactics in social networking sites and the shaping of intimate stories

Although the flows of capital within market and cultural powers are significant to understand SNSs as active actors in shaping the intimate stories on SNSs, both theoretical perspectives have a very linear relation towards the audiences who interact with these platforms. Focusing on the everyday media-related practices of 'ordinary people' puts the strategies social media institutions use to guide storytelling, connecting and sharing into a more nuanced perspective. Specifically, considering market and cultural powers in relation to *specific appropriations* (De Ridder, 2013) can expose an extra layer of complexity. Consequently, it is doubtful if popular social media institutions and their particular software designs could ever be seen as apolitical as such, as audiences using these social media websites are equally important actors, next to the institutions. Further, SNSs, as part of the cultural industry, should

not automatically be seen as a monolithic block that is 'totalitarian in its aims' (Fenton, 2007), but should be understood as institutions that each operate in specific ways. Seeing social media as products of popular culture recognises the never-ending struggles between media industries on the one hand, and audiences on the other (Fiske, 1989/2010).

Specific insights into the relations between technology, society and user agency that depart from social constructionist perspectives can help to nuance overly deterministic visions. In particular, the social construction of technology perspective (SCOT) and actor network theory (ANT) are valuable to this end. Firstly, SCOT, mostly associated with Bijker Carlson and Pinch (1993), centralises human agency in the development of technologies. Different users are understood to give different meanings to technologies. Consequently, this 'interpretative flexibility' adds contingency and complexity to the society/technology relationship instead of a one-sided domination (Bell, 2001). Secondly, ANT (see Latour, 2005) is similar to SCOT in its idea, although it is more deeply concerned with the ordering of the social by looking at the 'complex interactions between human and non-human actants' (Van Loon, 2008, p. 114). ANT is specifically interested in analysing action, focusing on the continuous *reconfiguration* of technologies in the social sphere (van Dijck, 2012). Just because these theories focus heavily on agency and the social, they have been criticised for disregarding cultural norms and political economies (Bakardjieva, 2005; van Dijck, 2012).

A purely social constructionist perspective seems unsatisfactory to expose the complexities of the mediation process that takes place in the storytelling practices on SNSs. However, everyday life appropriation should be central when inquiring into social media. Therefore, as illustrated in Figure 1, I propose an approach to reflect on how popular SNSs shape the stories of people by focusing on everyday life practices considered in relation to the techno-socio-cultural approach with political economic insights (van Dijck, 2012). This critical approach to the everyday online life investigates the media-related practices of SNS audiences as tactics. Tactics is a concept developed by de Certeau (1984/2003) in *The Practice of Everyday Life;* it refers to how people offer continuous

resistance to the strategies of power by making places their own, or in de Certeau's words *habitable* (Fiske, 1989/2010). The tactics are to be understood in continuous dialectical relation with the strategies of SNSs, earlier defined as market powers and cultural powers.

In the empirical part that follows, this multi-layered approach (as illustrated in Figure 1) will be applied to the intimate stories of young people in the popular SNS Netlog. By focusing on a particular case study, the tactics that are used to tell these stories will be considered in relation to the strategies of the website, which are the economics and the particular infrastructures of the software platform. This everyday life approach to the Internet typically involves taking an ethico-political stance towards the normative frameworks through which intimacies, gender and sexual identities are disciplined, while exposing the potentialities for emancipation within everyday life (Bakardjieva, 2010, p. 63).

FIGURE 1.   EXPOSING THE MEDIATION PROCESS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNSs): FRAMING SNS INSTITUTIONS AS ACTORS IN INTIMATE STORYTELLING PRACTICES
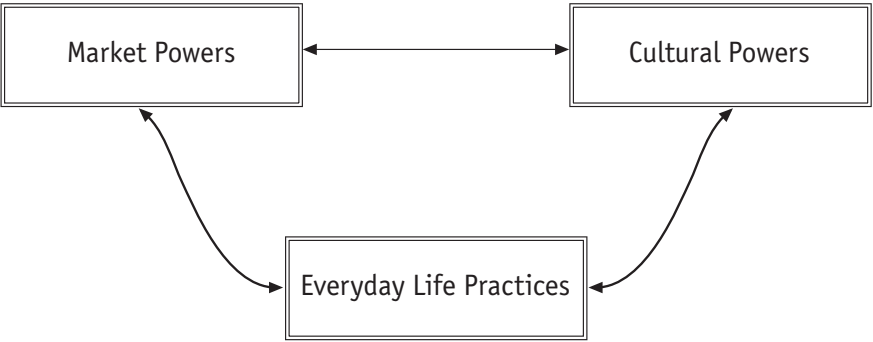
Method

Data collection

As an illustration of how to frame the power of the platform in relation to the intimate stories young people tell through social media in everyday life, I will present some results collected from a larger research project that investigates how intimate storytelling could be understood as a popular media practice through the emergence of digital media like SNSs, specifically among teenagers between 14 and 18 years old. This inquiry was centred around an 18-month participatory observation[1] of the popular SNS Netlog in a particular Northern Belgium context (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011; Silverman, 2010), starting in November 2010 and ending in April 2012. This participatory observation proceeded by creating a profile on the SNS in which I introduced myself as a researcher, including my institution, location, age and contact details. On the profile, I carefully explained the purpose of the study and guaranteed the protection of privacy. The youngsters were recruited through an invitation to add this profile in their offline life worlds (e.g. schools, youth movements), which provided them with a clear explanation and control over their participation in this study.

This participatory observation was supported by a document analysis of information retrieved from the website,[2] a Northern Belgium newspaper and magazine articles about Netlog,[3] and an interview with Eveline Vermaesen, the Assistant Community Director of Netlog.[4] Further, eight focus groups were conducted with a total of 51 youngsters in which general social media use was discussed,[5] specifically focusing on intimate practices, gender and sexuality.

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1 Although the participation was very limited, as direct interactions with youngsters in Netlog was avoided, the researcher's role in this process could therefore also be described as 'observer-as-participant', whereby the role as observer is central, but some interaction is not excluded.

2 This information was gathered on the Netlog webpage in sections for interested advertisers (http://nl.netlog.com/advertise/), developers (http://nl.netlog.com/go/developer) or the 'about Netlog' pages (http://nl.netlog.com/go/about).

3 The database Mediargus, which monitors the Flemish press, was used to collect these articles from the following newspapers and magazines: *De Morgen, De Standaard, De Tijd, Gazet Van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, Klasse, Knack and Trends*. All articles before December 2012 were collected.

4 This semi-structured expert interview was conducted on 12 December 2012 in the Massive Media headquarters with Eveline Vermaesen, who has five years of experience working for Netlog.

5 Eight focus groups with a total of 51 participants (13-19 years old) were conducted from November 2011 until February 2012, using a structured set of interview questions. All participants had accounts on different social media that they used regularly.

Data analysis

I will not provide an exhaustive overview of the collected data. Rather, the focus will be on media-related audience practices as observed within the Netlog profile. The documents, expert interview and focus groups will not be analysed in their own rights, but will serve as a profound contextualisation of the storytelling practices, making a multi- layered approach possible. Primarily, the analysis exposed the social and cultural organisation of the intimate stories with a specific focus on the mediation process of the Netlog platform. To analyse the data in a consistent way, 200 profiles were saved and archived in offline documents. A quantitative analysis was used to look at the frequency in which particular software designs that give meaning to intimacy were used (Krippendorff, 2004; Schrøder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003), combined with a more qualitative textual analysis (van Zoonen, 1994) that relied on queer and critical social constructionist theories of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers & Carver, 2008).

Netlog's market strategies

The strategies Netlog uses to attract audiences to interact with the website are specific, but have also evolved considerably due to strong challenges on the SNS market, such as the gradual monopolisation by Facebook in Northern Belgium. Netlog is described by the institution itself as a 'community website' that is heavily related to 'being popular, fun and entertaining'. Two young Internet entrepreneurs founded Netlog, which was preceded by the websites Redbox and Facebox. At the start, these websites had basic functions, allowing people to maintain contacts that they got to know in chat rooms. In 2007, Netlog received support from 'Index Ventures', a leading venture capitalist in technology, and was quickly becoming a European market leader and immensely popular in Northern Belgium until 2010. To understand Netlog's strat-

egy, it could be summarised under the four 'unique selling propositions' by which it differentiated itself to audiences and advertisers:

1)   Netlog targets itself very specifically at youth aged 14-24;
2)   although the website is active in Europe, Asia, the US and the Arabic countries, it is highly adapted to local cultures and specific regions;
3)   in contrast to Facebook, it markets itself as a platform to get to know *new* people;
4)   brands are highly integrated and interactive on Netlog; Netlog publics interact with 'brand pages' and become 'brand ambassadors'.

Moreover, just like most SNSs, the economic model was dedicated to keeping users on the site as long as possible, entertaining them with games, news feeds and so on. It also pushes people to produce and share content on profiles and within the wider community, as the Assistant Community Director explains:

> The more members with completed profiles, the more members with attractive profiles, the more members are attracted to make a profile of their own on Netlog, the longer they will stay on the website and the more active they will be. So yes, we stimulate people to create content.[6]

Although it does not seem directly evident, these different market choices had particular relations to the intimate stories told on Netlog. Although Northern Belgium youngsters used Netlog intensively in 2010 (74% had an account and Netlog was reported as the second most popular website), the rapid growth was followed by a fast decline. In 2012, only 22% of Northern Belgium youngsters regularly logged into Netlog.[7]

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6   For practical reasons, all quotes in this paper are translated from Dutch to English.

7   The percentages used here are published every two years by the Flemish Network for Youth Movements (*Jeugddienst en Jeugdnetwerk*). The reports contain results from a large-scale quantitative survey on the new media use of Flemish teenagers. This research is executed by the research group for Media and ICT (MICT) at Ghent University. The 2010 and 2012 reports can be found here: http://www.apestaartjaren.be/node/585.

Audiences' responses to strategies

The audiences' responses to the market strategies of Netlog are interesting, as they illustrate how users quickly respond to strategies of a popular media product that is heavily intertwined with their everyday life intimate practices. In the focus groups, Netlog was described as a place you should 'not go anymore'. Youngsters reported that there was too much focus on popularity, making the website a place for 'sluts' and 'playboys', leading to the website being nicknamed 'Slutlog'. Moreover, youngsters reported problems with grooming and unwanted 'older men' connecting with them, a problem that did not exist on Facebook. Although Netlog had taken numerous initiatives to strengthen its security in the meantime, the Assistant Community Director stated that they did not know how Netlog had come to deserve its bad reputation. Moreover, she emphasised that 'with all the initiatives we took, there is nothing to reproach us'. Lorenzo Bogaert, one of the founders of Netlog, declared in the newspaper *De Tijd* that Netlog was indeed very intensively used for dating, which is inconsistent with how Netlog was primarily used by a very young age group under 16 years old, to which Netlog was partly targeted.[8] Therefore, he argued, the concept had to be urgently reconsidered, starting from scratch.

The reasons audiences disagreed with the strategies of Netlog are multiple. A general media panic about privacy and SNSs, the worldwide popularity of Facebook and a turn to more online authenticity (Lovink, 2012) rather than a website that is fun, built around anonymous nicknames and getting to know 'new people' are all very important. These online social media cultures of authenticity are in its core a recent demand for more uniformity in people's online identities. Authenticity does not only add values to particular storytelling practices, but also it has become the ethical standard of social media websites, strongly marketed by Facebook as 'authenticity-based, real name culture' (Staksrud

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8   'We beginnen opnieuw vanaf nul', published in *De Tijd* on 20 July 2011.

& Lobe, 2010).[9] A disagreement with the 'less authentic' strategies of Netlog is an important way of refusing to allow a particular place to be part of the users' everyday social practices and intimate cultures. Therefore, an understanding of audiences' tactics brings important insights into the market power of media institutions such as SNSs.

Netlog's cultural strategies

Alongside the overall market strategies Netlog has to attract advertisers and users, the four 'unique selling propositions' that I have defined relate to how the software platform is designed. Specifically aiming at youth, the design is colourful and is focused on 'fun' features such as applications that reproduce the profile owner's current feelings, games and polls. This is in contrast to more 'business like' designs such as those used by Facebook, which focus on 'authenticity' (Baym, 2010). Foremost, the Netlog design is an easy-to-use template that strictly guides the user through the 'community', unlike SNSs such as MySpace, the software platform is more closed and does not allow code to make a profile. Moreover, to create a community experience within a larger network, underlying algorithms ensure that every user has an individualised experience based on their demographic data and location.[10] This is crucial for Netlog's strategy, which wants users to get to know *new* people, thereby creating the possibility of becoming popular beyond the circle of connections on the profile. Consequently, this initial view of the software design shows that a popular SNS platform does not come from nowhere, but is heavily related to the market strategy. In this way, market ideas of how to attract audiences and advertisers are translated into the further designs that play a role in the shaping of people's stories.

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9   This particular quote is how Facebook introduced itself as a company operating a social media website in the report of the European Commission on safer social networking principles.

10   Therefore, Netlog uses geo-targeting technology, which allows the website to adapt the user experience, depending on the user's location.

How the software design represents intimate identities

Elaborating on how cultural powers are inscribed in software design, I introduced Cover's (2012) argument that SNSs are built around 'heavily politised identity categories'. When looking at which media Netlog provides to tell intimate stories, there is a mixed set of options available that can roughly be divided between those that allow the user to choose an option from a software inventory, and others that are more 'free' to create content, such as places for writing self-introductory texts and uploading profile pictures. The concern of feminist, critical social constructionist and queer theoretical interventions is with these software inventories that leave little room for political negotiation. In Netlog, one is not allowed to *not define* a fixed 'sex'. Users can only choose between the binary option of male or female, which continuously represents genders as a biological and essential fact, rather than allowing a diversity and cultural complexity to be reflected (Butler, 1990/2006; Fausto Sterling, 2000). Other self-representational tools that represent intimate identities on Netlog are answering questions such as 'I'm falling for', 'love status' and 'looking for'. Other than 'sex', these questions are not mandatory to answer or publish on the profile. However, as the answers are to be given within a pre- defined number of choices, intimate identities become fixed constructs that are continuously reiterated within the 'community'. Creating its own 'fun' and 'young' style, Netlog was more creative in the choices users had to answer these questions; an example of this is 'love status', where users can choose between 10 options (Almost there…, In love, I'm not going to tell you!, Married, Been through a lot, I need a break, Partnered, Single, Engaged, Dating). In my conversation with the Netlog Assistant Community Director, Eveline Vermaesen, it became clear that these design choices are not top-down decisions, but rather are considered in light of feedback from 'community members' of Netlog:

> I think that the website is built completely around asking feedback to users, we know a lot of our members. We have a lot of people that come to give us feedback spontaneously, but we also have a lot of talks with

> users, thereby asking; 'What do you think of this?' [...] So, actually, we usually anticipate on what users want, this is something we profit from.

Consequently, understanding the power structures behind the software design demands a more complex understanding than automatically assuming that SNS institutions impose a cultural template on people. Rather, the website is shaped within wider social and cultural subjectivities that organise gender and sexuality, to repeat Feenberg's words, by the 'hegemonic interests of the society it serves' (Feenberg, 1999, p. 174). As products of *popular media culture,* SNS designs are highly integrated within the everyday routine practices of their users. Therefore, they are considered as products of 'the people', rather than those from a digital media industry; as Fiske (1989/2010, p. 22) states, the 'cultural resources' are of the people as they decide 'to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture'. Although Netlog can be seen as a popular culture product that shows flexibility in producing software in dialogue with its audiences, a cultural materialisation that supports the hegemonic organisation of intimacy is important to acknowledge. In this way, the software platform not only shapes the meaning of intimate identities, but also the stories and bodies represented in profile pictures.

Audiences' tactics

The understanding of the market and cultural strategies of Netlog has to be considered alongside the everyday life tactics of people using the website (see Figure 1). Specifically relying on critical perspectives of the social and cultural organisation of intimacy, it is particularly useful to expose a potential media-related *ordering* of intimate storytelling practices (Couldry, 2004).

In relation to the specific appropriation of the youngsters within my research sample, the way the Netlog software design demands the identification of a fixed, stable sexual identity is interesting, as 86% do *not* define sexual identity within a closed software template (see Figure 2).

Although the youngsters' personal and social reasons could be complex, it shows that taking appropriation into account is important to understand the performative infrastructures of SNSs. Moreover, I noticed how youngsters prefer to define sexual identities and relationship statuses within the 'free' space of textual self- introduction (De Ridder, 2012), which allows them more creative freedom such as using heart symbols. The following example is illustrative of how intimate identities are built within the free textual spaces that Netlog created for textual self-introduction:

> Your love is my drug, Jonaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaas ♥
> April 7th '10 ♥
> (Girl, 17 years old)

Moreover, when talking to youngsters about the software design and its limitations, they spontaneously addressed strategies for making the popular SNSs they use habitable. Being creative with free textual spaces was thereby frequently mentioned.

However, as shown in Table 1, a more profound look at the way the intimate self- representational tools are used reveals that significantly more boys (19.8%) define their sexuality than girls (8.8%). Further, defining a clear, stable sexual identity connects significantly with indicating that one is looking for a relationship. More users who are looking for a relationship (25.6%) define their sexuality than users who are *not* looking for a relationship (10.2%). Again, the reasons could be personally and socially complex. However, the way the software is used culturally clearly illustrates an identity practice that works to a coherent and stable heterosexual matrix for organising gender and sexuality.
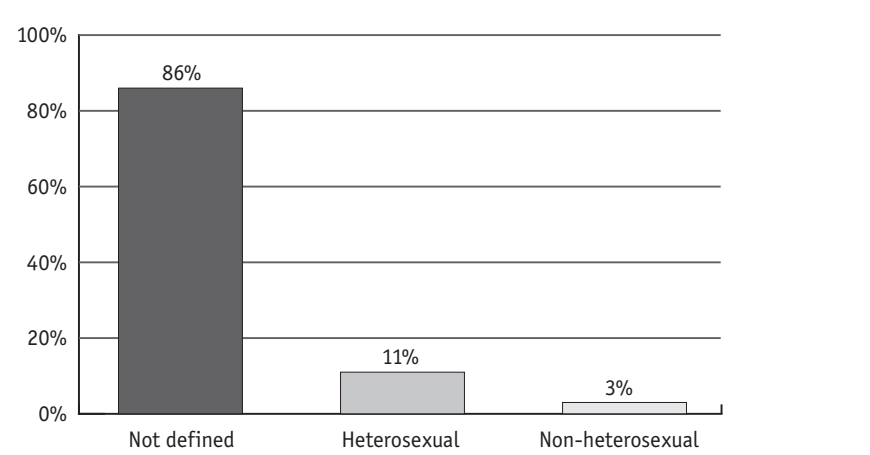
TABLE 1.   INTELLIGIBILITY IN SOFTWARE CATEGORIES **(*** *P* < .01 ***** *P* < . 05**)**

Sexuality defined within software	% within female	% within male	% within people indicated to be looking for a relationship	% within people indicated not to be looking for a relationship
yes	8.8**	19.8**	25.6*	10.2*
no	91.2**	80.2**	40.7*	89.8*

Firstly, more boys defining a clear, stable sexual identity concords with how a hegemonic masculinity regulates the subordination of homosexuality (Connell, 2005). Consequently, the software platform contributes to the meaning making of how a stable masculinity is connected and created through a coherent sexual identity (Butler, 1990/2006). Secondly, defining a clear, stable sexual identity within the platform is preferred if one is looking for a relationship. Although such an identity practice that works to a coherent performance is observable in everyday life, software platforms are particularly strong fixing tools that do not support intimate identities to be lived as a never-ending political process.

Formulating challenges: rethinking tactics and exposing mediation

By defining how Netlog positions itself in the market and analysing the software design in relation to intimate storytelling, I illustrated how the market and cultural powers of this particular SNS institution can be considered in relation to specific tactics in everyday life. Often, this exposed a more complex struggle, which shows how a multi-layered view is useful to understand the transformative mediation process of young people's intimate storytelling practices on SNSs (see Figure 1). However, as much as de Certeau's (1984/2003) tactics and strategies still seem valuable in relation to digital cultural industries today, Manovich (2009) stated that much has changed in the 'consumer economy' since *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Manovich argues that 'The strategies used by social media companies today, however, are the exact opposite; they are focused on flexibility and constant change' (Ibid., p. 325). Indeed, the same is observable in the case of Netlog. As people started to run away, or started using the site by using specific tactics, Netlog quickly changed strategies as it constantly monitors *page views* and the appropriation of different tools on the website. As Netlog kept on losing users, the company created a dating site called 'Twoo' (www.twoo.com) – which they prefer to describe as a 'social discovery platform' – and integrated this on Netlog. The website quickly became a worldwide market leader and was sold together with Netlog in December 2012 to Meetic, a French dating site that is a part of the large American Internet group InterActiveCorp.[11] Hence, this illustrates how 'today strategies used by social media companies often look more like tactics in the original formulation by de Certeau while tactics look like strategies' (Manovich, 2009, p. 325). Despite these evolutions within the media industries, leading to intense interactions between these corporate institutions and audiences, I argue there is no fundamental revolution between market, cultural powers and audiences' practices. However, struggles between these actors – institutions and audiences – became

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11   *Twoo en Netlog in Franse handen*, published in *De Tijd* on 21 December 2012.

certainly more intense, which makes it more difficult to distinguish strategies form tactics.

Other than a media theory that increasingly has to cope with a constantly changing media industry, exposing mediation in digital media practices without making overly technological determinist claims is challenging. Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand how the social and cultural organisation of intimate stories is precisely affected by an everyday intense participatory media flow, long-term reflections on the mediatization of intimacy are important. Precisely because the use of SNSs is increasingly becoming such a habitual everyday media practice, the market and cultural powers embedded within SNSs often become invisible, as I noticed talking to youngsters in the focus groups. Remarkably, the subject of the role of the software platform was very difficult to explain to them. Mostly, they were surprised by the question and did not know how to answer.

> I have never thought about this…
> (Girl, 17 years old)

> No, actually I have never (…), it is what it is, that site is that site and if you want to be part of it then (…) well then you just have to accept what they offer you, I mean common…
> (Girl, 14 years old)

> Whatever … you can't change anything to it, can you?
> (Girl, 14, years old)[12]

While a software platform can quickly be 'made visible' through talking about it, the intensive media flows SNSs are producing are far more subtle, but perhaps even more important to uncover.

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12 Quotes are cited (originally in Dutch) from the following focus groups: focus group two (six participants, conducted on 16 November 2011) and focus group four (five participants, conducted on 20 November 2011).

Conclusion

Empirical contributions on SNSs often ignore how the complex mediation process relates to everyday social and cultural practices. In this paper, the concept of mediation was defined as a *non-linear process* that is relevant to the study of social media. Mediation in social media relies on four different processes: representation, subjectivity, technology and participation. The *institutions that mediate* are to be recognised as important actors in this transformation process (Silverstone, 2002). Following Van Dijck (2012), I proposed a *multi-layered* approach to illustrate how SNSs contribute to the shaping of the intimate stories young people tell; SNS institutions need to be analysed within their performative infrastructures that rely on market and cultural powers, considered in a dialectical relation to their specific appropriations.

In this paper, I elaborated on a specific Northern Belgium case study using the SNS Netlog as an example, which is, rather than an exhaustive discussion of results, an illustration of how a multi-layered approach can contribute to a better understanding of the role of popular SNS institutions in the self-representational storytelling practices of youth, as well as the wider mediatization of intimacy. It is important to acknowledge how software platforms are sense-making objects; therefore, it is useful to conceptualise them as cultural templates that are created within the subjectivities of the specific social and cultural spheres in which the platform operates. Connecting the economic and marketing strategies of Netlog with the specific design of the software platform exposes how both are inextricably intertwined. Although youngsters in the sample used specific tactics to navigate through the website, intimate stories were shaped as: (1) the software structures the intelligibility of audiences' stories, demanding the definition of a coherent gender, sexual and intimate identity; and through (2) the continuous stimulation to produce stories. Consequently, intimate stories become framed within an intense media flow.

Media-related practices such as telling intimate stories on SNSs are ordered through the use of technology in complex ways. Consequently,

the question of how to live an intimate life with all these digital and networked media becomes increasingly important for further research; as this research showed, the mediation process often remains invisible. New media companies are flexible, constantly changing and closely connected to their audiences' tactics. Due to this reconfiguration of the media and cultural industries, considering ethico-political arguments is challenging. From a critical feminist perspective for example, Wajcman (2010, p. 150) concludes; 'it is impossible to specify in advance the desirable design characteristics of artefacts and information systems that would guarantee more inclusiveness'. Moreover, on whose social and cultural values should these be designed (Light, 2011)? The inquiry in this paper served as an example of a multi-layered research praxis. However, due to its specific context, it is only a start for the ongoing need to research social media practices while taking seriously the complexities of mediation processes. Making the power of mediation processes visible in the everyday life seems a first step in dealing with digital and networked media technologies such as SNSs.

Commenting on pictures:
Teens negotiating gender and sexualities
on social networking sites

Abstract

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

Keywords

Digital Sexualities, Heteronormativity, Resistance, Sexual Citizenship, Youth.

Reference

De Ridder, S., Van Bauwel, S. (2013). Commenting on pictures: Teens negotiating gender and sexualities on social networking sites. *SEXUALITIES, 16*(5/6): 565–586.

Introduction

> I love all the stars in the sky, but they are nothing compared to the ones in your eyes.
> My World;$ (l)
> (XNieZnn)

XNieZnn, a 17-year-old boy, chooses to proclaim his love for his girl-friend in the semi-public space of the social networking site (SNS) Netlog. For young media users, Netlog is a popular space to ''hang out'' (Ito, et al., 2010). Closely intertwined with the everyday lives of teenagers, this social website is constituted by the participations of its many users. At the same time, the material conditions of the website actively constitute youth cultures and their everyday life practices. The software of SNSs organizes people into connected networks and makes a considerable part of their social interactions semi-public; the medium takes part in the creation of new youthful subjectivities (Hall & Jefferson, 1993/2006; McRobbie, 1994). But how do gendered sexualities thrive in these networked publics? In this essay we will inquire how young people negotiate sexualities and gendered practices when commenting on popular profile pictures. We will determine to what extent discourses on gender and sexualities are constituted within a heteronormative framework, and we will come to understand how contemporary youth represents a doubtful proof to be open for diverse gender behaviors and sexual identities.

Profile pictures are important communication tools in SNSs, often visually representing an identity in cyberspace (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011). Focusing on text comments about profile pictures allows us to understand public networking as a *practice*, producing, reproducing and consuming meanings (Castells, 1996/2010; Wittel, 2001). The representational activity of posting pictures on one's profile creates content and *contexts* that negotiate sexualities and gender practices. Despite the increasing popularity of participatory media such as SNSs, particularly among young people, cybersexualities have not been taken seriously. Contributions questioning power and diference in popular and mainstream environments such as Facebook, MySpace and Netlog are scarce. In particular, sexuality in relation to cultural intelligibility and normativity has largely been ignored (Van Doorn, 2009).

This article will take the current late modern antinomies surrounding gender and sexualities in media culture as a central point of inquiry. Therefore, we will rely on the perspectives of cultural media studies, a subject which has always approached media productions and representations as sites of political, social and cultural struggle (Fiske, 1989/2010; Kellner, 1995). Jackson and Scott (2004) understand the ambiguity within the productions and representations of sexuality as significant changes that cast up new contradictions each time they appear. Subject positions towards gender and sexuality are seen as more reflexive then ever (Johansson, 2007; Rahman & Jackson, 2010), ''choosing'' their own post-traditional lifestyles. However, despite this reflexivity and the acknowledged transformations of intimacy (Giddens, 1992), identities are created within a bounded system, producing prescribed transcripts of how to produce, reproduce and consume gender and sexuality. Particularly in relation to media, Gill (2007, 2008) demands attention for the current contradictions in representation, exposing its complexities and the oscillations between empowerment, inclusiveness and a recuperated sexual subjectivization and exclusiveness (Ross, 2012). Therefore, to expose these ambiguities, we take up a critical investigation about what organizes gender and sexualities in everyday mediated life worlds, focusing on heterosexuality as the current

dominant border in western culture (Ingraham, 2005; Jackson, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Katz, 1995/2007; Ward & Schneider, 2009; Warner, 1991, 1999; Yep, 2003). Constantly reiterated and proliferated in interactions and representations, heteronormativity is the current way of life. This normative project is unquestioned and considered necessary in order for one to be viewed as a legitimate member of society. We do not distinguish social institutions from the concept of heteronormativity; we understand them as fully incorporated within and interrelated with practices and identities.

Since social networks are highly participatory media, it might be argued that they lead to greater inclusivity and thus function democratically to renegotiate heteronormativity. Taking our point of departure from queer analysis (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers, 2007), we have conducted a qualitative textual analysis (Mckee, 2003; Silverman, 2010) of picture comments made on social networking sites. Informed by the praxis of deconstruction (Derrida, 1967/2003), we have exposed how gender and sexuality are repetitively constructed. Further, we discuss salient resignifications of these performative repetitions. Performative repetitions do not refer to a "natural" original; rather, they continuously construct their own reality.

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

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

Sexualities in networked publics

> Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or
> look them in the eye. You also cannot easily avoid them.
> They have become an almost natural feature of the social landscape,
> like pavement.
> (Warner, 2005, p. 7)

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

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

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

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

Nevertheless, to fully understand gendered sexualities in networked publics, one most also consider not only the public character of these publics, but also the specific networked nature of negotiations that take place in SNSs. Rather than focusing solely on the networked nature of SNSs, this evolution in technology, communications and information needs to be positioned within what sociological thinkers have come to

understand as the ''network society'' (Castells, 1996/2010), or ''network sociality'' (Wittel, 2001). Closely related to late capitalism, network sociality is intertwined with late modern traits, such as individualization, ephemeral but intense contacts, commoditized social relations, and a focus on exchange of information. Social bonds are continuously produced, reproduced and consumed (Ibid.). These late modern characteristics are increasingly associated with the SNS (Baym, 2010), whereby the medium is seen to facilitate an online stage for the ''the networked self'' to develop (Papacharissi, 2011). Although SNSs profiles are self-organized and self-centered, they do not escape power structures. This is due to their underlying architecture. Barabási (2011) describes how the number of friends in SNSs follows a "power law distribution," where only a few individuals have a lot of friends, while most members of the network have a smaller but similar number of friends. These popular ''power hubs'' resemble the thoroughfares of a big city; they have high social capital and a great deal of influence in the network.

While there have been many studies relating to gender, sexuality and the internet (see the works cited later in this paragraph), topics such as power and difference and gender and sexuality have hardly been discussed in relation to SNSs. Researchers have largely neglected the question of how sexualities and gender practices thrive in networked publics (Van Doorn, 2009). Some notable exceptions are Mainsah's contribution on ethnic minority self-representation (Mainsah, 2011), Cover's work on romantic coupledom (2010), discussions of gender and/or sexuality (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Van Doorn, 2009), and discussions of femininities and masculinities (Gómez, 2011; Siibak, 2010). Nevertheless, as Van Doorn rightly points out, studies in digital culture or cybercultural studies and more specifically cyberfeminist (O'Brien, 1999; Plant, 1995; White, 2006), cyberqueer (Alexander, 2002) and digital race studies (Nakamura, 2002, 2008) are part of a broad tradition of critical investigations.[1] Literature has been published about LGBT identity issues and online new media (Mowlabocus, 2010; Pullen & Cooper, 2010);

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

these studies proved to be valuable contributions to our understanding of specific opportunities and threats that LGBTs face in various online environments, such as online communities, Facebook and the popular dating site, Gaydar.

Research on cyberqueer spaces is valuable, as it deals with rival publics that offer resistance to heteronormativity. Nevertheless, an intimate citizenship demands a plurality of voices in all public spheres other than the ''truly, truly subversive public cultures'' (Plummer, 2003: 71). Cyberqueer spaces are counterpublics. Therefore, they have a dialectical relationship to the general public, redefining ''them'' and ''us'' (Coleman & Ross, 2010). They implicitly honor intelligible identities as ''pure citizenship'' (Warner, 2005). It should be emphasized that young people need popular and mainstream online spaces such as Facebook, MySpace and Netlog to be open for a late modern world. That means these spaces must support an intimate citizenship that transgresses heteronormativity.

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

diction (Gill, 2007). The next section will introduce how this ambiguity emerges. Moreover, it will elaborate on how the organization of gender and sexuality is strictly heteronormative, but also how new possibilities for resistance are open.

Locating and dislocating subjects

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

Social media research often discusses social selves in a way that is problematic. Emphasis on self-representation neglects certain tensions and complexities; in particular, it takes a pre-discursive agency for granted. Because the self is not an ''isolated entity, but one that operates at the intersection of general truths and shared principles,'' it is more valuable to use the word ''subject'' rather than ''self.'' As Mansfield (Mansfield, 2000, p. 3) notes, ''one is always to be subject *to* or *of* something [emphasis in original]''. Although the subject is seen as more reflexive than ever, choosing its own post-traditional lifestyles, essentialist notions of gender and sexuality are still the norm. Rahman and Jackson (Rahman & Jackson, 2010, p. 194) understand this essentialism as a continuation of '''modern' biological and psychological essentialism [that] is still the baseline cultural explanation for both gender

and sexual behaviour." Research on youth cultures, gender practices and sexualities constantly conflict with oppositions, such as liberation and morals, equity and repression (Johansson, 2007; Nayak & Kehily, 2008). Negotiations of gender and sexual identities in networked publics involve complex social interactions within contemporary culture, and they need to be understood as social and cultural struggles.

Gender practices and sexualities in Western society are subject to heteronormative identities, practices and institutions, excluding identities and creating boundaries in society. For this reason, the intimate citizenship project of networked publics seems overly optimistic. At the same time, there is a transformed intimacy (Giddens, 1992), precisely because heteronormativity is continuously being resisted and eroded in everyday life. Certainly, popular media environments have the power to deconstruct, creating counterhegemonic representations of intimacies and thereby gradually eroding heteronormativity (Best, 1998; Fiske, 1989/2010; Kellner, 1995). Queer analysis is particularly valuable in showing not only how deconstruction takes place in everyday interactions, but also how it could lead to non-normative identities. Queer politics is particularly interested in exposing binary oppositions by which gender and sexuality are regulated, and in showing how regulatory signs are placed upon the body.

Developing a theory based on queer politics helps to show how normativity is produced and at the same time resisted. Further, it could help to understand how the mediated nature of the SNS could contribute to an open online public sphere. We use Butler's understanding of subversive politics (Butler, 1990/2006) as the basis for our definition of *locating* and *dislocating* subjects. The notion of subversion elaborated in Butler's *Gender Trouble* (Ibid.) can be seen as a political response to norms, where the agency of the subject appears from *inside* the system itself. Butler did not use the term heteronormativity. However, she did use the corresponding term "heterosexual matrix," by which she meant the assembly of norms that produce subjects whose sex/gender/ desires and practices cohere (Chambers, 2007). As a first and important discussion of feminism and subversion, Butler seeks to locate areas

where norms need to be challenged. The concept of reiteration is central to her argument. Normative gender and sexual identities are produced by means of reiteration, and they can be resisted by exposing repetitive practices. As Chambers (2007) puts it, exposing heteronormativity is about ''undermining norms'' and ''calling them into question'' by means of ''revealing their conditions as norms.'' Dislocating normativity is nothing other than exposing repetition. Since subversion is an ''incalculable efect'' that is strongly dependent on context, it is impossible to define which practices are subversive or non-heteronormative.

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

Method

As part of our research project,[2] we created a profile on Netlog, a popular SNS for Flemish youth living in northern Belgium (Jeugddienst & Jeugdwerknet, 2010). We contacted schools and youth movements and

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2 This research is part of a four-year project on youth, digital culture and heteronormativity. The created research profile was followed during a long period (18 months), with different moments of data collection. Precisely because of this long-term follow up, we tried to limit the influence of participants modifying their online behavior for the research. Notwithstanding these precautions, the impact of the informed consent could never be totally judged.

recruited Flemish teenagers between 13 and 18 years of age to friend our profile. When the participants were asked to join, it was made clear that their profiles were going to be used for academic research. In doing so, we tried to obtain informed consent from the participants.[3] In this way, we were able to incorporate profiles in our research that would otherwise be unavailable to us because of privacy settings. Therefore, some of the profiles we used are semi-public spaces, only allowing friends to look at the pictures and comments.[4] Research into online identities has some specific challenges, creating an added complexity of the online versus the offline identity, the ''real'' versus the ''virtual''. However, ''online'' identities do not reconfigure new subjectivities. Kennedy (2006, p. 861) therefore offers to go ''*beyond* online Identities'' [emphasis in original] and to look at offline contexts of online selves. Following Kendall (1999, p. 58), who argues that ''On-line interaction cannot be divorced from the off-line social and political contexts within which participants live their daily lives''; this inquiry understands the observed online negotiations as augmentations of the everyday.

Research sample

Owned by Massive Media and based in Belgium,[5] Netlog is a mainstream SNS that markets itself as an ''online platform where users can keep in touch with and extend their social network'' (Netlog, n.d.). On Netlog, people have the ability to create personal profiles that connect them with the larger network by indicating people as ''friends.'' Profiles include media that can be customized and personalized. These features are personal self-representation tools (pictures with rating functions,

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

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

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

videos, a blog, self-introductory texts, general profile layout, personal events calendar, etc.), as well as tools for interpersonal communication (sending personal messages) and communication with the larger connected network (comments on pictures and videos, the guestbook, etc.).

Although there was a wide range of data available to us, we chose to analyze comments on the most popular profile pictures. We chose to proceed in this manner for several reasons. First of all, comments on popular pictures turned out to be the most active (semi-)public spaces where intimate stories were being told. Furthermore, by choosing the most popular profiles within our sample, we were sure to incorporate active publics that had a lot of intersections with other users. When we extracted the data in October 2011, our profile was connected with 159 users. From among these, we chose the 10 profiles that had the greatest number of visitors, and from each of these we selected the picture that generated the largest number of comments. In this way, we had a total research sample of 10 profile pictures and 812 comments, which we copied and saved in orderly documents.

Data analysis

The analysis provided here is not exhaustive for the collected data. Rather, it is illustrative of the elaborated theories. Qualitative textual analysis has been used to analyze the comments. The text was seen as an expression of a multiplicity of voices, which we exposed through the processes of (1) locating and (2) dislocating. Informed by queer criticism (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers, 2007), we have made sense of discourses that deal with gender practices and sexualities (Mckee, 2003; Silverman, 2010). We studied how the textual productions of picture comments are reflections of discursive knowledge on intimate or erotic aspects of social life. In this first step of our analysis, we attempted to locate where norms could be challenged. Further, this textual analysis shows through a deconstructive reading (Derrida, 1967/2003) how the ideology of heteronormativity also fails. More specifically, how this fail-

ing represents counterhegemony (Best, 1998; Fiske, 1989/2010; Kellner, 1995). This second step is how we came to understand the project of dislocating. Although we focused particularly on the text, the pictures, which are often accompanied by a small introductory text by the producer, are important contexts that we also took into account.

Commenting on pictures as a gendered practice

Commenting on pictures in the public space of an SNS is not a neutral practice. There are specific dynamics and practices correlated to the mediated nature of public networks. As Mainsah (2011) concluded when looking into self-representations of ethnic minority youth in an SNS, the use of language is often hybrid, people mix social languages when interacting and producing text online. Looking at our data, it can be observed that in this particular Flemish youth culture, the Dutch language was often mixed with English words and expressions. Moreover, Dutch words and syntax were often modified, resulting in a more phonetic use of language.[6] Collective and interpersonal dynamics resulted in structural patterns that influenced how individuals reacted to compliments; this was especially the case when reacting to pictures that portrayed intimate relationships. These complex semiotic structures need constant interpretative work when one wants to belong to this youth culture and to actively comment in the Netlog context. The appropriate use of communication patterns creates an insider status and implicit power structures that support the creation of a shared group identity. The network also perpetuates communication rules and practices that already exist in youth culture (Mainsah, 2011, p. 198). According to Baym (2010), it is more difcult to build a solid group identity in an SNS than in an online community, because the personal profile centers focus on the subject, rather than on the group. Baym (2010, p. 91) uses the term ''networked collectivism'' to describe how certain group identifications may arise in

6   In the examples used in this article, we consistently translated the comments to English. Because of this practical
      consideration, the aspect of ''language play'' is lost in the examples.

networked publics. Based on our observations, we determined that a networked collectivism with specific communication rules and practices had emerged. The age and geographical identification of group members were the primary factors affecting these rules and practices. The mediation of identifications associated with a specific youth culture not only perpetuates communication rules and practices of everyday life among the Flemish teenagers, but also continuously reinforces them.

Table 1 presents an overview of the specific cases used in this research. We have included some basic information collected from user profiles, including gender and number of visitors. The numbers of visitors are somewhat high for the Netlog context; hence, these profiles are popular power hubs, interconnected with a very large number of ''friends'' in the network. The number of comments recorded demonstrates the often large number of interactions occurring in these publics.

TABLE 1.   DETAILS OF THE POPULAR PROFILES, PICTURES AND COMMENTS WITHIN THE NETWORK

	Nickname	Gender	Age	Total visitors (not unique)	Number of comments on most popular profile pictures divided by gender		
					Male	Female	Author*
1	kendeman	Male	16	677.255	10	156	35
2	Sinback	Male	17	152.317	8	6	3
3	Z_Raauw	Male	18	142.303	8	240	2
4	XNieZnn	Male	17	78.658	15	72	14
5	Kurtpicture	Male	18	72.722	-	21	1
6	tuning.beats	Male	18	54.524	4	26	1
7	Youaretheone	Female	16	52.040	26	21	6
8	Sandroishere	Male	16	50.166	10	55	12
9	_Kiwi	Female	100**	47.399	28	2	13
10	Persianman	Male	18	46.396	9	8	-

*   By "author" we mean the comments that are placed by the profile owner him or herself.
** This girl is 16 years old in real life, but on her SNS profile she claimed to be 100 years old.

As the table shows quite clearly, boys do not tend to comment as much, while girls are very active in commenting. Therefore, commenting can be understood as a gendered practice, whereas comments refer to implicit rules stemming from the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990/2006).

When commenting, coherence between the biological sex, the performative gender and the expected desire is necessary (Chambers, 2007). Girls predominantly react to the pictures of boys, and boys only comment on pictures of girls. Girls were not as strict as boys in fitting within this structure, resulting in a very binary opposition where boys always conform and girls step out to engage in ''girl talk'' (see next section).

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

Excessive girlhood

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

seem to be active producers of texts that circulate beyond their bed-
rooms that were "long understood as the primary location for girls' crea-
tive endeavors" (Ibid. 2006, p. 3). When girls comment on pictures from
other girls, as in the photos of Youaretheone and _Kiwi, they are prima-
rily concerned with propagating strong friendships between themselves
and the girl in the picture.

> I love her soooooo muuuuuuch! ♥ (Girl, 14 years)
> I love you sooooooooooo!. (Girl, 16 years)

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

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

> You are fucking beautiful! (Girl, 16 years)

> Heeey! Ken is a sick, wonderful crazy love!
> I just wanted to say this because I think you are wonderfuuuuull! Nobody can
> compete with you, I'm your biggest fan. (Girl, 14 years)

This excessive form of hyper-femininity is reinforced by the mediated
nature of the SNS. Moreover, reiteration and communication rules work

together as catalysts and partly determine the performances of excessive femininities (see the section 'Commenting in networked publics' later in this article).

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

Negotiating hegemonic borders

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

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

Bro! Xxx. (Boy, 16 years)

Big love between us! (Sandroishere)

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

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

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

Fo´to´sho´o´t @ Turkey ^^

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

The photo shows a wet-haired young boy on a tropical beach, stripped to the waist and looking into the lens while gently smiling. This picture was commented on extensively. The introductory text declared that the producer had certain reservations about representing himself this

way. The accompanied text and picture demonstrate that performative masculinity is an ideological project, continuously under construction, and that there is a possibility of doing it incorrectly. The struggle over this performance is a clear negotiation between a mediated subject that wants to look his best and the normative constraints of having a heterosexual identity that regulates depictions of the body. The comments on this photo and text relied on two diferent strategies. They countered the stereotype that a beautiful man is automatically gay, and they took heterosexuality as the norm.

> not gay! Just veeeeryyy niiiice! 😊 (Girl, 16 years)

> Whahahahh, no dear Kane we all know (I think) that you are not gay.
> (Girl, 17 years)

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

> I think too that you look a little gay on this picture . . . (Girl, 20 years)

> Indeed gay, but yeah, what can you do about it eh XP. (Boy, 20 years)

The label ''gay'' is not automatically an identity for homosexual boys, as Pascoe (2007) argues; this abject identity (Butler, 1993) rather constitutes and regulates masculinity in society. In these particular mediated representations, commenting could be seen as a regulatory practice, surveying heteronormativity. This supports the argument that commenting is a gendered practice. Besides regulating the subject when interacting and placing comments, commenting also actively surveys and interpellates others.

Although we found examples that suggest gendered behaviors are expanding for boys, even in a public environment, hegemonic masculinity is not completely dislocated. Furthermore, different strategies were used in the textual and visual representations to recuperate hetero-

sexuality when negotiating an inclusive masculinity (McCormack and Anderson, 2010). The gendered practice of commenting is a reciprocal action, not only regulating the comments of the subject, but also actively surveying and interpellating others.

The perfect couple

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

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

This mediated representation of an intimate relationship shows how the gendered practice of commenting operates from within a heteronormative perspective. Predominantly, these comments seem to illustrate that ''institutionalized heterosexuality provides a sense of well-being'' (Cokely, 2005, p. 180). Repeated overstatements refer to ideas inter-

twined with the ''wedding industrial complex'' exploited in popular culture and media and with religion and state institutions (Ingraham, 2008).

Side by side with the public dialogue between the couple, other comments iteratively encourage the relationship, thereby *reproducing* the importance of institutionalized heterosexuality and the coupledom/promiscuity binary (Cover, 2010). Most commenters emphasized the couple should *keep/keep'n/keep!* their relationship, while others expressed their jealousy.

Mediated romantic coupledom can be understood as a theatrical performance that goes beyond representing it visually in a picture. Textually producing and reproducing institutionalized heterosexuality as the *summum bonum* shows how the gendered practice of commenting on pictures is closely intertwined with heterosexuality (Ingraham, 1995).

Commenting in networked publics

The mediated nature of these public spaces has a complex role in how it contributes to a possible cultural resistance that transgresses heteronormative identities, practices and institutions. Generally, commenting on a picture is a gendered practice that demands coherence to the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers, 2007). As mentioned earlier, the mediated nature of the SNS strengthens representations of coherence, but it also creates a stage for occasional counterhegemony, or dislocations of passive femininity and hegemonic masculinity. This struggle reflects the complexity of how a queer political project can thrive in an SNS. There are two media logics for how networked publics transform social negotiations of gender and sexuality. The first is the repeated public display of gender and sexuality, while the second involves the iterative logic of mediated communication.

The redundant public display of gender and sexuality is valuable,

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

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

Conclusion

As we made sense of how youths negotiate gender and sexualities when commenting on popular profile pictures, we argued for an understanding of the struggles of the late modern subject (Johansson, 2007; Nayak & Kehily, 2008; Rahman & Jackson, 2010). Supported by media and communication technologies, today's youth cultures are immersed in an ongoing flux of producing, reproducing and consuming meanings. An SNS can be seen as the ultimate mediation of the network society, a complex platform for social change. While viewing networked publics as contexts for negotiations of gender and sexuality, this study emphasized

the importance of queer criticisms, since the intersections of power/difference and gender/sexuality are largely ignored in the expanding field of research about SNSs. In exposing the locations and dislocations of heteronormative identities, practices and institutions in texts that commented on popular pictures, we showed how gender and sexuality could be culturally resisted.

We came to understand commenting on pictures as a gendered practice, meaning that in order to be intelligible, comments needed to cohere between the biological sex, the performative gender and the expected desire (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers, 2007). This gendered practice is strongly intertwined with a continuous representation of heterosexuality. Therefore, we argue that the representation of heterosexuality can be understood as the – although not always intended – ultimate purpose when commenting on a picture (Ingraham, 1995).

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

Constructing the Gay Teenager in Times of Mediatization: Youth's Reflections on Intimate Storytelling, Queer Shame and Realness in Popular Social Media Places

Abstract

New media applications such as social networking sites are understood as important evolutions for queer youth. These media and communication technologies allow teenagers to transgress their everyday life places and connect with other queer teens. Moreover, social media websites could also be used for real political activism such as publicly sharing coming out videos on YouTube. Despite these increased opportunities for self-reflexive storytelling on digital media platforms, their everyday use and popularity also bring particular complexities in the everyday lives of young people. Talking to 51 youngsters between 13 and 19 years old in focus groups, this paper inquires how young audiences discursively construct meanings on intimate storytelling practices such as interpreting intimate stories, reflecting on their own and other peers' intimate storytelling practices. Specifically focusing on how they relate to intimate storytelling practices of gay peers, this paper identifies particular challenges for queer youth who transgress the heteronormative when being active on popular social media. The increasing mediatization of intimate youth cultures brings challenges for queer teenagers which relate to authenticity, (self-)surveillance and fear of imagined audiences.

Keywords

Gay Youth, Queer, Social Media, Mediatization, Focus Groups.

Reference

Introduction

In 2007, Larry Gross, a well-known scholar on gay identities and media, wrote a story about a gay teenager 'Gideon Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2012.' Gross looked backwards to see the world the gay youth have won 'growing up with a reasonable common news and entertainment presence and with the opportunities for exploration and contact offered by the Internet' (Gross, 2007). Although in the end, Gross remained critical of the progress he described ('this is one of those "half empty, half full" stories'), he trusted; 'Gideon will live in a freer world by the time he reaches 25' (Ibid., p. 136). Today, 2013, Gideon is 26.

This paper reflects on being a gay teenager in current times of mediatization by inquiring through focus groups how teenagers discursively construct their gay peers when talking about intimate storytelling practices in *popular and mainstream social networking sites* (SNSs) (e.g. Facebook, Netlog). Thereby, this paper offers a reflection of what it means to 'grow up gay' in everyday life worlds that are heavily entangled with digital and interactive media technologies and media cultures; which we refer to as the process of *mediatization* (Hepp,

2012; Krotz & Hepp, 2011). This paper is, first, broadly interested in the larger cultural process of meaning making through inquiring the discourses on homosexuality related to media practices, and second, we discuss how these meanings may affect the everyday life worlds of gay teenagers. Thereby, this paper does not say anything about the actual experiences of gay teenagers, but rather exposes concerns over culturally constructed inequalities related to sexual identities in popular social media places.

In 2007, Gross argued that the Internet 'could literally be a lifesaver for many queer teens' (Ibid., p. 129). The emergence of popular websites (such as Gay.com), gay chat and social media aimed at gay publics (e.g. Gaydar) have indeed brought increased opportunities for teenagers to transgress their everyday life spaces, finding support to come out and learning about gay identities (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Gray, 2009; Pascoe, 2011). Although these opportunities need to be recognized, as the Internet has become more mainstream today, it could be seen as 'more local' and attached to everyday offline places (Postill, 2008). In Western youth cultures, the Internet is far from one big anonymous space, but rather collapses into specific places. Popular SNSs are the most important ones for teenagers today, as they are appropriated on a large and everyday basis (Baym & boyd, 2012), connecting them to friends from school, sport clubs and so on. Therefore, we argue that growing up gay in times of mediatization not only adds opportunities, but also complexities. These complexities are not only *technological* (e.g. as a consequence of being more visible in a public networked environment), but also cultural; how gay teenagers become *meaningful* through the practice of telling intimate stories by using the media tools (such as text, pictures and videos) that SNSs provide.

This paper relies on eight focus groups with 51 youngsters between 13 and 19 years old from the Dutch-speaking region of Northern Belgium,[1] who were all everyday users of different social media websites, especially Facebook. Although we talked with them about general social media

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1   Although our research is situated within the context of Northern Belgium, our results and discussions refer to contemporary Western youth cultures in general.

use, the core of the research was reflecting on intimate storytelling as a discursive audience practice (Couldry, 2012) that gives meaning to gender, sexuality and (romantic) relationships. We also talked about their own performative intimate storytelling practices, as well as their positions as audiences interpreting other peers' intimate stories. Further, reflections were made on intimate storytelling practices from the position of *holebi's*, which is a word used in Northern Belgium referring to gay, lesbian and bisexual.

Due to the large appropriation of popular SNSs in the everyday lives of Western youth, living an intimate life outside of media has become unimaginable for teenagers. Social media 'serve as resources for youth to begin, maintain, and, less frequently, end intimate relationships' (Pascoe, 2011, p. 11). We put forward a concern with how queer youth can participate in 'social ritual events' equal to their heterosexual peers (Pullen, 2012, p. 170). As such, queer teens can find their own ways of becoming an intimate citizen in times of mediatization (Plummer, 2003) by telling their own intimate stories, and they can do this without continuously being subjected to heteronormative identity constructions and ideals. First, we will introduce intimate storytelling as a media-related practice and define queer shame and queer realness, both constructs that hamper the political project of becoming an intimate citizen. Next, we will introduce how the mediatization of youth's places adds complexities to their everyday lives. The second part of this paper focuses on the empirical findings and will expose young people's understandings and discourses on intimate stories of gay peers. Next, we will discuss how mediatized complexities related to social media practices in the everyday lives of teenagers are situated around authenticity, (self-)surveillance and imagined audiences. These discussions and reflections are based on how these complexities may affect the everyday lives of gay teenagers.

Intimate Storytelling Practices, Pride/Shame and Queer Realness

Exposing the larger discourses on homosexuality related to what young people are doing with digital media like popular SNSs, demands an understanding of the current social changes and cultural complexities related to what it means to be gay in current societies. Recognizing the rapidly changing discourses on homosexuality since the 1980s (Hammack & Bertram, 2009), and recent proofs of a 'declining significance of homophobia' (McCormack 2012), young people make sense of homosexuality in complex and sometimes even contested ways. Making sense of these socio-cultural developments through people's personal narratives and ways in which the self uses them to build identities is therefore valuable. Drawing on a critical humanist framework (Plummer 2001), this paper recognizes personal experiences and narratives, but also emphasizes larger cultural processes of meaning, structures of difference and power that discursively inform people's subject positions. Coining the metaphor 'intimate storytelling', Ken Plummer (1995) introduced a particular communicative act to understand this sexual identity development. Intimate storytelling can be understood as an interactionist practice in everyday life that gives meaning to gender, sexuality, desires and relationships. Foremost, intimate storytelling is a communicative and reflexive act of agency, framed within the personal histories of the narrator. Besides recognizing personal experiences and narratives related to sexual identity development, Plummer (Ibid., p., 26) emphasizes larger cultural processes of power and structural systems of difference. In dominant culture, such structural systems of difference relate to heteronormativity; which demands narratives to fit a coherent system of desire, sexuality and gender (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers & Carver, 2008).

SNSs offer an increasingly popular platform to tell such intimate stories. How young people make sense of these intimate stories in social media is therefore useful to understand how gay teenagers and broader queer identities[2] are constructed in current youth cultures. Intimate

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2   An important note on the sexual identity labels we are using in this paper is necessary. We will be using both 'gay' and 'queer'. We use 'gay' to refer to people self-identifying as having same-sex desires, and thereby share intimacies with people from the same sex. Consequently, our label 'gay' includes lesbian and bisexual people as well. Further, the term 'queer' is used in a broader sense, describing people who are broadly transgressing the heteronormative. This includes people who are gay, but also more broadly people transgressing the coherence between sex, gender and desire as described in the heterosexual matrix (see Butler, 1990).

stories of gay youth, such as coming out stories, or tellings about their same-sex relationships, are usually 'hyperrecognized' sexual desires because of their 'perceived deviance' (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 56). The central concern should be uncovering the processes that obstruct queer youth a voice (Couldry, 2010, p. 3); which stories are not allowed to be told, or which processes *mould* voices in particular ways and thereby constrain personal agency.

Intimate storytelling as a media-related practice is important, as it offers larger audiences to bring queerness out of invisibility and symbolic annihilation. Therefore, these stories are politically relevant representations. Also, telling your own story in a mediated context, which Nancy Thumim (2012) describes as *self-representation*, can be therapeutically relevant. Consequently, the role of the Internet has become important for the sexual identity development of gay youth (Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2008), but also for everyday political activism (Pullen, 2012); many examples can be found of coming out stories of gay youth on YouTube, which has become so popular it can be understood as a particular genre of 'rhetorical action' (Alexander & Losh, 2010). Although the potential of intimate storytelling in media for queer youth needs to be recognized as holding an enormous participatory potential that is personally, socially and culturally relevant, most insights focus on what they describe as 'political action', while our concern is with the everyday life of gay youth in which being present on popular social media websites has become a *sine qua non*. Everyday life with social media is often more complex and generally does *not consist of activism*, but complexities that are built around sexual, gendered, classed and raced inequalities (Pascoe, 2011). It needs to be acknowledged that within these spaces, queer youths are not immune or more protected from negative reactions or even bullying (Varjas, Meyers, Kiperman, & Howard, 2012). We will draw on the concepts of 'queer shame' and 'queer realness' to identify some of the complexities for queer youth to tell their own intimate stories in popular social media places.

Queer Shame/Pride Dichotomies

Intimate stories are deeply emotional. Love is a big theme among youth in SNSs, often expressed through representations in poems, lyrics of popular love songs, but also pictures of joy and sadness (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). For queer youth, the strong emotions involved in storytelling are often ignored when talking about their agency to come out and go through the same teenage rituals as their heterosexual peers. The often taken-for-granted empowerment assumed within the participatory possibilities to tell stories in social media environments not only implies a deterministic celebration of technology, but also fails to recognize that; 'reflexivity must be tempered by a recognition of the structural limits on the production of the legacies – emotional, political, representational – of a queer past' (Sender, 2012, p. 26). Indeed, shame may prevent a story from being told and is strongly linked to a past in which being gay was linked to being a pathological subject. Queer activism successfully transcended this shame to pride, which clearly illustrates 'affective economies at work, where words are substituted for each other' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 120). Although often denied in gay culture, pride relies on shame and both work in dichotomies (Munt, 2007).

How shame works in opposition to pride is observable within the discursive positioning of queer youth as 'innocent victims' versus 'activist educators' (Hackford-Peer, 2010). Framing queer youth within this discourse does not bring any change, but avoids the recognition of shame. This activist position is how queer youth is often made intelligible. Further, the strong focus on the self-reflexive opportunities to tell stories in popular social media fails to recognize the *immaterial labour* demanded from queer teenagers. Drawing on Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of immaterial labor, which 'regards the activity that produces the "cultural content" of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 133), Katherine Sender (2012) remarks that people create surplus value for companies operating SNSs (Terranova, 2000). Consequently, the self-reflexive opportunities for intimate storytelling in these popular social media places have to be seen within their commercial contexts. These

companies care little about what could be described as the *emotional labour* of transforming shameful identity positions towards pride; emotional labour can be seen as a usually unrecognized form immaterial labour of transforming shameful identity positions towards pride.

> We could see the self-production that GLBT people do in contemporary media as a particular form of immaterial labour: emotional labour. This labour includes expressing transformations of feeling from shame to pride through coming out narratives, managing their own emotions and relationships in their roles as queer ambassadors, and training others to be more emotionally accepting of GLBT people (Sender, 2012, p. 221).

Queer Realness

Next to the emotional labour of transforming shame to pride, another form of immaterial labour that queer youth is confronted with when telling intimate stories is the reworking of categories such as heterosexual intimacy, masculinity and femininity. Considerable identity work is demanded from queer youth in order to be intelligible and thereby embody a sense of *queer realness*. Queer realness, as defined by Judith Halberstam (2005, p. 52), is the 'appropriation of attributes from the real', while 'the real' is 'that which always exists elsewhere, and as a fantasy of belonging and being.' The *genre of queer realness* 'has the power to authenticate queerness through the textual and visual rhetoric of LGBTQ visibility that is (seemingly) real and tangible' (Gray, 2009, p. 1182). Queer visibility is often mediated, which emphasizes the importance of representations of queer identities in everyday life (Dhaenens, 2012). Therefore, the genre of queer realness and negotiated reading practices open – and at the same time limit – possibilities to become queer. Often, queer youth is demanded to be open and visible, thereby coming out is not presented as an option, but as a rigid construction and a condition of being a teenager with other than exclusive heterosexual

desires (Hackford-Peer, 2010). For some youth, genres of queer realness intensify insecurity (Driver, 2008), rather than offer opportunities for self-reflexive intimate storytelling.

Media such as film, television and the Internet have *extended places* for queer youth to look for 'the real.' Genres of queer realness, therefore, need to be reworked by negotiated readings towards a sense of self that is '"real", "natural", "unmediated" and "authentic"' (Gray, 2009, p. 1182). In mediatized life worlds, where digital and interactive media are used intensively, the relations between a mediated and unmediated 'queer self' becomes dense. Therefore, in the next part we will explain how this adds complexity to the everyday life spaces of youth. Although SNSs could be seen as valuable places in which young people should be allowed to appropriate and experiment with genres of queer realness, this process of becoming conflicts with current ('social') media cultures that focus on being authentic, real, sharable and connected at all times.

The Mediatization of Youth's Everyday Places

Following the introduction to intimate storytelling as a media-related practice in contemporary youth culture, this part argues that living intimacies with digital communications media in such an intensive way in everyday life changes the meaning of intimacy itself in youth culture. Thereby, we draw on the concept of mediatization as rather recently (well) developed within the European field of media and communication studies. A mediatization perspective includes understanding media and societal change and, other than reflecting on *mediated* communication, *mediatization* is a 'long-term process that has, in each historical phase, a specific realization in each single culture and society' (Krotz, 2009, p. 24). Consequently, mediatization is not directly graspable and collapses into many different, small and often connected mediatized life worlds (Krotz & Hepp, 2011). Mediatization concords with other meta-processes such as the 'democratization' (Giddens, 1992) and 'informal-

ization' (Wouters, 2007) of intimacy. Using the definition of Andreas Hepp (2012, p. 70), we will understand '*media cultures as cultures of mediatization*', meaning that 'media cultures are cultures *whose primary meaning resources are mediated through technical communications media* [emphasis in original]'. Consequently, youth cultures are co-constructed[3] through technical communications media in important ways.

Technical Communications Media as Extended Places

The mediatization of youth's everyday lives and particularly the emergence of very popular SNSs like Facebook are what we define as *extended places*. Typical for these highly interactive media spaces is that they are strongly connected to particular offline local places of which they are often an extension. Thereby, unhelpful binaries between 'offline' and 'online' lives, 'communities' and 'networks' are transcended (Postill, 2008). Research has shown how young people mostly use social media to 'connect and reconnect with friends' (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008), but also how 'youth's online and offline civic activities converge' (Hirzalla & van Zoonen, 2010). A localization approach on the Internet argues that 'network technologies and their corresponding practices are significantly altering the nature of local situations, both socially (how we share located information) and phenomenologically (how we experience that which is near)' (Gordon, 2008).

Complexities are added to the everyday life places of youth because of the technical features of digital and interactive media. The local locations in which teenagers operate such as their school, thereby often get an extra layer of meaning because of popular SNSs spaces that are populated by most of their peers. Everything that is communicated through social media is far more traceable and could, therefore, more easily be subjected to peer (but also parental, family, etc.) control. Consequently, strategies for peer group acceptance have become increasingly complex.

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3   Which Hepp refers to as the process of 'moulding'.

Surveillance is always present (Warrington & Younger, 2010), but these technologies make surveilling more accessible. Besides the mutual monitoring that is more visible, digital interactive media that is organized in networks allows more pervasive monitoring that is 'asymmetrical, nontransparent information gathering' (Andrejevic, 2006, p. 398).

Constructing the Gay Teenagers in Mediatized Cultures

How do 'the gay teenagers' come into being in current mediatized cultures in which technological communications media are so focused on interactivity and the participation of 'ordinary people'? In current cultures of mediatization, there is a lot more going on than a pure technological evolution, but rather a cultural focus on 'the real', self-disclosure, authenticity and participation, sharing and connecting. Besides being represented as fictions, coming out stories have become media events since the end of the 1990s in popular talk shows such as Oprah (see Oprah.com, 'coming out on Oprah'). Further, in the SNS YouTube, these queer stories have become a narrative genre. Particularly social media websites have contributed considerably to the *connect with everyone* and *share everything* culture (van Dijck, 2013). Thereby, popular social media websites such as Facebook demand authenticity and being 'honest' through the use of real names and the connectedness with offline friends (Baym, 2010).

The everyday life of young people with media indeed holds democratic potential to tell their own stories about sexuality, their genders and relationships. However, mediatized cultures often add ignored complexities. Interactive media cultures cultivate surveillance and often perverse pleasures of looking, but on the other hand continuously search for moments of authenticity and 'the real' (Andrejevic, 2006; Turner, 2010). Queer youth is constructed in mediatized cultures as through genres of *queer realness* that are *shame free*. Particularly youth living in the age where social media places are of such importance, the democratic opportunities to tell their own intimate stories seem to come with

an important amount of emotional labour and social complexities such as *imagined audiences*. Although audiences are imagined in everyday face-to-face communication, the mental conceptualization of people you are communicating with using media is difficult to determine. Moreover, the popularity and the large scale in which content is produced in social media, imagining the audience is a challenge (Litt, 2012, pp. 332-333). Just because of the perceived deviance of intimate stories that transgress the heteronormative, social media audiences can become scary imaginations for queer teens. In the next section of this paper, we will expose some complexities in mediatized cultures such as authenticity, (self-)surveillance and imagined audiences.

Methods

The empirical part of this paper draws on eight focus groups (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011) with teenagers between 13 and 19 years old, with a total of 51 participants (18 boys and 33 girls) . The focus groups were organized from November 2011 until February 2012 and took place in a range of places such as schools, youth movements or at one of the participants' homes. As a condition to participate in the focus groups, we required the participants to have at least one active account on a social media website. However, this did not appear to be a drawback in recruiting participants, as a large-scale quantitative survey demonstrated that social media websites are very popular among Flemish youth; particularly Facebook, on which more than 90 per cent of 14- to 18-year-olds have an account.[4] The popularity of Facebook was also reflected within our own sample; only two participants did not have Facebook, but used alternatives. Further, social media use was not limited to Facebook alone, most of the focus group participants indicated that they also had accounts on Windows Live, Netlog and other social media websites.

4   The percentages used here are published every two years by the Flemish Network for Youth Movements (*Jeugddienst en Jeugdnetwerk*). The reports contain results from a large-scale quantitative survey on the new media use of Flemish teenagers. This research is executed by the research group for Media and ICT (MICT) at Ghent University. The 2010 and 2012 reports can be found here: http://www.apestaartjaren.be/node/585.

Our research situates itself within the large amount of scholarship done within the field of *audiences studies*; more specifically, how 'people's media use is anchored in the contexts of everyday life' (Schrøder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003, p. 5). However, with 'use', we do not focus solely on the interpretation of mediated texts and self-representations, but rather on the surrounding media-related practices (Couldry, 2012). In this case, the focus is on how teenagers reflect on a wide range of intimate storytelling practices in social media websites and thereby give meaning to their gay peers as an identity discursively constructed within specific social media places. In order to discuss this sensitive topic within the focus groups, we relied on some fictional questions and 'imaginations' of participants. This method is applied in qualitative interview research that makes use of 'vignettes' (Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010). Although a true vignette methodology makes more intensive use of fictional scenarios that the interviewer builds up during the research, we limited ourselves to some 'imagine yourself questions' to discover more about the participants' beliefs and values (Davis, 2012). The following example is one of the questions that were used during the focus groups.

> Imagine yourself, you are gay or lesbian, do you display your
> relationships on your profile in the same way as if it was between
> a boy and a girl?

These 'imagine yourself questions' were successful in making such intimate and socially complex questions safer to respond to for the young participants. Moreover, these questions succeeded in creating group interactions that clearly referred to the participants' *knowledge of social and cultural norms* attached to intimate storytelling practices in social media places. However, it must be emphasized that these questions could not tell us anything about what the participants would do in 'the situational action' (Jenkins, et al., 2010, p. 179). Furthermore, it is important to evaluate the degree of plausibility; to what extent the participants were able to identify with the fictional question. It is

important that 'interviewees are adequately prepared' (Jenkins, et al., 2010, p. 188); therefore, we took time in the introduction to explain to the participants about the 'imagine yourself question' format.

The collected data from the focus groups was transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, the transcripts also incorporated field notes with impressions from the different sessions, as well as silences, emotions such as laughing and intonation. The data analysis combined grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with a critical inquiry (Charmaz, 2006) in which 'heteronormativity' was applied as a sensitizing concept (Goltz, 2009). This means looking for discursive constructions of how intimate stories and gay identities are subjected and made intelligible to binary identity categories (e.g. male/female, masculine/feminine, straight/gay, single/in a relationship). The coding was open and consisted of a two-phase process in which a first coding structured the data according to what knowledge came into being in the fragment. Second, we looked specifically at constructions of queer identities and coded moments of queer realness, shame, pride, surveillance and authenticity, while including the possibility for new codes to emerge. The qualitative coding software NVivo10 was used to code the data, while the analysis was written out manually using pen and paper in combination with a word processor. To illustrate the elaborated findings and theories, we will use quotes between brackets or clearly separated from the main text. Additional information about the respondent will be given between brackets (FGX, X, X), consisting of the focus group number, age and gender of the participants.

Stories of Shame

When talking about intimate stories in the popular social media of gay peers – whether imagined peers or not – most participants *recognized* and emphasized the emotional labour to transforming this 'shameful' identity position towards pride.

> Most gay people are ashamed of being gay; therefore, I think they will not put this on their profiles very clearly (FG4, 17, F).

> I think there is still … euh … disgust towards gay people (FG6, 16, M).

Although many respondents made it clear that when you are gay, you should be able to represent yourself as such on your profile, many of them showed how they have knowledge of the power that circulates around the practice of intimate storytelling, which mainly privileges heterosexuality; 'in practice, this is not always so [that you have no limits to represent yourself], when you are gay it is still quite delicate' (FG4, 17, F). Multiple reasons for the peculiar status of gay intimate stories were addressed such as it being mainly a problem of a largely heteronormative society that seems accepting 'but when they encounter someone who is gay, they will have less respect for that person' (FG2, 14, F). Typically related to social media places, the participants recognized that you would have to cope with negative reactions; 'on Facebook you maybe would get more comments' (FG5, 15, F). Moreover, surveillance for such stories is recognized as pervasive and illustrates how social media are extensions of youths' everyday life places; publishing gay intimate stories will probably have as a consequence that people will 'start talking behind your back' (FG1, 18, M) in different places such as school. Further, when talking about profile websites specifically aimed at gay publics, participants recognized this could be a safer environment for queer teens than mainstream popular SNSs.

> I think they have to keep in mind that there are many people who do not appreciate they put this on Facebook. Maybe it would be good for them to do this on another website… (FG3, 16, M).

Pictures showing gay relationships representing intimacy (such as kissing and hugging) were problematic as they are 'still a little more shocking than a normal couple kissing' (FG8, 16, M). Consequently, we also need to distinguish between intimate stories that are textual, and those

represented visually as they are perceived as more shameful or even potentially 'harmful' for the heterosexual audience, as a boy explained during one of the focus groups.

Alongside recognizing the emotional labour to transform shame to pride, some participants did not immediately recognize the difficulties for queer youth to tell their own intimate stories on social media. Some made these statements from a supportive attitude such as; 'they do that [referring to gay peers telling intimate stories] and they are not ashamed, which is rightly so' (FG1, 14, F). Others stressed the individual responsibilities of their gay peers, who should anticipate negative comments and thereby restrain from publishing anything that could provoke negative comments. Others emphasized that it is really important to be authentic and truthful and therefore not just share your intimate stories on SNSs aimed at gay publics; 'It is my opinion that if you are gay, you should come out, and not just stay on these special websites' (FG6, 17, M). A minority of opinions did not recognize the idea of shame from a more problematic cultural context of silent homophobia. We refer to silent homophobia as a discourse within the focus groups that was not supportive or accepting towards gay identities, but neither directly homophobic. Silent homophobia strongly privileges heterosexuality and does not (always) intend to stigmatize (McCormack, 2012). The following citation is an illustration within the context of silent homophobia in which emotional labour was denied. Within the focus group, it was clear how the participant had problems with accepting out and proud gay identities.

> Most people who are lesbian or gay, or whatever, they… they are really proud of being gay. And if they come out, I do not think they care what people think of them (FG6, 16, M).

Stories of Queer Realness

Most participants argued that they could recognize something as a queer genre, by which we mean they produced knowledge on how certain intimate stories could be recognized as queer. The role of pictures is important, as they are seen as a form of *representative realism* that *sometimes* allows you to uncover 'the real' sexual identity of the profile owner. Thereby, the teenagers based themselves on rather essentialist assumptions of 'gay markers' attached upon the 'natural body' such as womanish like pictures for a guy, or skater clothes for girls.

> I did not come across that many [profiles of gay peers], but yeah, in some cases they have rather womanish pictures! That is in the case of a guy (FG3, 16, M).

> On the profiles of boys, if you look at the pictures on Facebook, it is more notable [in comparison to girls] (FG5, 15, F).

Although they recognized a genre of queer realness, the discussion on visibility and recognizing gay identities on social media profiles was mostly about comparing boys and girls in relation to each other. Therefore, they mostly relied on personal experiences of the past or simply imaginations to expose what this queer genre might exactly be. However, this seemed complex and was in constant negotiation within the focus groups, unless an intimate relationship is clearly represented between two persons of the same gender.

A particular form of exposing queer realness was *gendered policing* applied to the profiles of boys. For example, boys taking 'fashionable pictures' (which were nicknamed 'fashion boys') were seen as unpopular because 'this is rather…gay' (FG6, 16, F). Remarks such as 'that is so gay' (FG6, 16, M) are not intended in a way to hurt gay peers, but are used to refer to girlish self-representations of boys. Again, this needs to be contextualized within a cultural discourse of silent homophobia in which there is no direct intent to stigmatize, but heteronormative

gender performances are clearly privileged. A minority of participants reproducing this discourse also argued that they could strongly recognize queer realness, rather than negotiating the existence of 'the real' as we argued before.

> For example, I would be able to say immediately, if two girls would be standing here, I would immediately see who is a lesbian and who is not' (FG3, 16, M).

Last, and opposed to the previous example, a group of participants spread across different focus groups rebuked and thereby swept away any essentialist understanding of queer realness.

> I don't think you could see this on the person itself… well… it depends. I don't think you could see this by looking at a profile picture (FG1, 14, F).

Mediatized Complexities for Gay Teenagers

After elaborating on how teenagers reproduced knowledge about the intimate stories of their gay peers, we reflect on the challenges this could bring for young people who have queer feelings and identities; how do these meanings may affect the everyday lives of gay teenagers? Therefore, we discuss a particular aspect of the mediatized life worlds of young people; how everyday contexts are 'marked' by the media and communication technologies of popular social media websites (Krotz & Hepp, 2011).

Participants within the focus groups took many different positions towards their peers and the accompanying intimate storytelling practices. Consequently, mediatized complexities in queer teenagers' everyday lives could not be sufficiently understood without contextualizing these performances in the focus groups within particular cultural

contexts of homosexuality themed language, ranging from homohysteria to a gay-friendly culture. Therefore, we rely on the model of homosexually themed language as recently developed by McCormack (2012, pp. 118-119). None of our participants relied on discourses of homohysteric cultures, which reproduce strong homophobic language. But rather, we observed how on the one hand discourses departed from a cultural context privileging heterosexuality, while others relied on gay-friendly cultures. Cultures privileging heterosexuality ranged from being *accepting/supportive* in which statements fit that argue, for example, that gay people should have the freedom to be on a website targeted at queer audiences, while at the same time 'it is only more than justified that they are welcome among the normal people [that is on mainstream websites such as Facebook]' (FG8, 16, M). Discourses of *silent homophobia* were discussed earlier (cf. supra) and have a clearer intent towards privileging heterosexuality mostly through gender policing, possibly resulting in a negative social effect. This is in strong contrast to the discourses that rely on gay-friendly cultures, which *deconstructed* binary oppositions such as straight/gay, masculinity/femininity as in the following example.

> Yeah... But that is just a part of who they are. We are also communicating on our profile if we are a boy or a girl, or that we are in love or not... That's just the same... I do not see any problem (FG2, 14, F).

Table 1 summarizes how these three clusters of discourses on homosexuality connected to the recognition of the emotional labour of transforming shame to pride, as well as how queer realness was recognized as a genre. Relying on technological and media cultural transformations, we will argue how *authenticity, (self-)surveillance and imagined audiences* are mediatized complexities that gay teenagers could possibly be confronted with when telling their intimate stories in popular social media places.

Intimate stories as meaningful in social media	Gay-friendly cultures	Cultures privileging heterosexuality	
	DECONSTRUCTING	ACCEPTING/SUPPORTIVE	SILENT HOMOPHOBIA
Recognizing queer shame	Recognized	Less recognized	Less recognized
		AUTHENTICITY IN MEDIATED PLACES	
Recognizing queer realness as a genre	Less recognized	Recognized	Strongly recognized
		QUEER REALNESS AS SURVEILLANCE TOOL	
Recognizing emotional labour when imagining audiences	Recognized	Recognized	Recognized
	SELF-SURVEILLANCE FOR SELF PROTECTION		

Accepting that queer intimate storytelling is a practice that demands emotional labour from gay peers was widely recognized, although less so within discourses that were accepting/supporting and silently homophobic. Some participants argued that gay people are responsible for finding the right tactics to deal with people who disagree with their sexual identity on social media, or they disregarded that being gay is something teens would ever feel ashamed of (cf. supra). Further, we also observed how this was connected to an emphasis on *authenticity demanded within mediated places* such as SNSs. The arguments were that sharing your 'true' sexual identity online is important, certainly when 'you are together with someone and dare to walk in the city with your partner so everyone could see you' (FG3, 17, M). Media cultures in which media are produced with or by 'ordinary people' carry with them a sense of authenticity, which is demanded by audiences from people who participate (Turner, 2010). Particularly social media websites such as Facebook have strongly branded the idea of 'sharing' everything about your life (van Dijck, 2013). Authenticity is therefore an essential part of young people's everyday media cultures and related practices such as intimate storytelling. However, authenticity disregards the

emotional labour for queer teens to perform intelligible selves across the different places in which they operate and disregards the difficulties of transcending shame to pride.

Intimate stories were recognized as having an essential representative 'realness', particularly when framed through discourses that relied on cultures privileging heterosexuality. Discourses of silent homophobia strongly recognized queer realness. Cultures privileging heterosexuality made use of this particular genre to 'uncover' peers as gay in social media places. In this way, *queer realness became a surveillance tool*. Participants explained how they appropriate social media to look for 'gay markers' if they suspect that one of their friends or acquaintances is gay.

> And there he was, on his profile picture while wearing Mickey Mouse things! And a little pink scarf! (FG3, 16, M)

> I think I would recognize a gay, but I do not know any gays. However, at boarding school I'm sleeping with someone who is a little gay because he behaves rather effeminate. One night, I looked on his profile together with another friend, but I don't think you could see anything (FG8, 15, M).

Last, when participants were imagining if they would tell their own intimate stories within their everyday social media places if they were gay, there was no observable difference in the discourses towards homosexuality; all participants recognized the emotional labour to come out as gay, certainly at their current age. This illustrates how the mental process of imagining audiences in social media places heavily relates to the participants' knowledge of the social and cultural norms circulating in their youth cultures; which in these cases clearly privileged heterosexuality. To deal with this, participants' tactics were *surveilling their own self-representations* to protect themselves. This self-surveillance consists of continuous negotiations about which stories are acceptable or not.

> I do not know if I would publish the name [of who he would be in a same-sex relationship with]. Maybe just indicating "in a relationship", but not telling… well indicating "gay" and "in a relationship", but not telling with who you are actually having a relationship with (FG6, 17, M).

As we have discussed earlier (cf. supra), visual representations through pictures of same-sex intimacies are another example in which self-surveillance becomes apparent. The imagined audience position is particularly problematic for the creation of open, diverse and inclusive social media places, as it could strongly influence the actual behaviour in social media that is displayed to the actual audiences (Litt, 2012). In such cultures where heterosexuality is strongly privileged, there is a stronger probability that queer intimate stories – especially in pictures – are symbolically annihilated out of fear of the imagined audience of young people's social media places.

How about Queer Youth, Popular Social Media Places, Modernity and Change?

Returning to the story by Larry Gross (2007), as referred to in the introduction, modern evolutions in media and communication applications continue to expand during the time Gideon turns 26 in 2013. Queer teenagers today have enormous opportunities to participate in online stages, resulting in a range of inspiring political actions and stories that flow across many different public Internet platforms. The stories in digital and interactive media places have been celebrated as 'proofs' of a newly installed storytelling and citizenship, but have at times embroiled a demotic turn (e.g. ordinary people creating media), with a democratic one (Turner, 2010). Therefore, this paper focused on teenagers who use popular social media as heavily intertwined with their everyday life practices and places, instead of framing them automatically as skilful activists who have a powerful voice.

We could ask, rather provocatively, have modern technological communications media changed anything about the cultural privileges attached to heterosexual practices, identities and institutions in youth cultures? Change through the emergence of new technological opportunities for participation, online spaces for finding information and support are all evident and have been, as Gross argued, 'lifesavers'. However, often less visible is that material changes in media technologies come with new *meanings* and power/knowledge structures attached to them, certainly when they become popular and mainstream products from a media industry. These media cultural complexities are first generated by the institutions that operate them (e.g. specific social media websites that are built around the marketing of connecting and sharing), but also the collective of audiences using them (e.g. searching for entertainment, authenticity and realness). Therefore, mediatized youth cultures operate within these meaningful norms and practices attached to using popular social media in everyday life.

Starting from theoretical conceptualizations of queer shame and realness, we argued that forms of often unrecognized emotional labour hamper self-reflexive storytelling for queer teens. Therefore, we should be concerned with an intimate citizenship in popular social media places; are queer teens able to tell their own intimate stories in social media places equal to their heterosexual peers? Can queer teens go through the same teenage rituals, such as celebrating their first love on social media, as their heterosexual peers do? These concerns over 'the rights to choose what we do with our bodies, our feelings, our identities, our relationships, our genders, our eroticism and our representations' (Plummer, 1995, p. 17) could be seen as the very core of the political project of *becoming an intimate citizen* in mediatized societies. To answer these questions, understanding mediatized youth cultures could be an important step; exposing how media cultures work in the everyday lives of youth, but also contextualized within its social and cultural contexts that organize gender, sexuality and relationships such as the discourses in which homosexuality currently operates (McCormack, 2012).

Our findings illustrated how discourses on homosexuality were at-

tached to media cultural complexities in popular social media places (see Table 1). Accepting/supportive and silently homophobic discourses were built around cultures privileging heterosexuality, which were more concerned with authenticity in mediated places when it comes to being 'honest' about your sexual identity. At the same time, they showed more recognition towards the existence of a queer realness genre that could be appropriated to uncover and surveil someone as (possibly) gay, a media-related practice that seemed quite entertaining for the participants within the focus groups. Clearly, this contradiction leaves queer teens with a complex set of norms and dilemmas of how to behave in popular social media places when thinking about peer group acceptance – what to do about coming out online, and what about posting a picture together with a lover? Further, we found that not only discourses were constructed around privileging heterosexuality, but also those who were gay-friendly struggled with the idea of telling intimate stories if they were gay. The complexity in popular social media places to imagine who the actual audiences of your stories will be results in a fear of telling and publishing certain intimate stories. Leading to self-surveillance, fear of imagined audiences could be problematic for symbolic transgressions of heteronormativity; moreover, it also positions heteronormal stories as more authentic, while queer intimate stories should more often remain 'unmediated' to protect the self from possible harm.

In this paper, we showed how mediatized complexities within youth cultures should be acknowledged when arguing that modern digital and interactive media have changed the positions of current gay teenagers for the better. However, in this paper we have not intended to say something about *the actual experiences and feelings* of queer youth when using popular social media places. Evidently, queer teenagers develop specific tactics to deal with these media cultural complexities. For example, queer youths are known to more intensively transcend local places by not only reconnecting with offline friends and acquaintances, but also making new contacts with gay peers through the use of the far-reaching global networks offered by social media (Gray, 2009; Pascoe, 2011). Evidently, an important next step should be sharing these mediatized

complexities with queer youth to know more about their specific tactics in dealing with authenticity, (self-)surveillance and imagined audiences in popular social media places.

Social networking sites and mediatized intimacies in youth cultures: New regimes of control

Abstract

Starting from the observation that young people live their intimacies in everyday life as intertwined with digital media such as social networking sites, this paper inquires the mediatization of intimacy. Arguing that media cultures have become primary resources in the social and cultural organization of intimacy, new regimes of control are introduced. Exploring intimate storytelling as a media practice, particular understandings of the self, identity and paradoxes of authenticity are connected to media ideologies; people's ideas about the media that have the power to shape interactions broadly oriented towards the media. These new regimes to control intimacy draw on intensive peer control over communicative interactions, imagined audiences and self-disciplining.

Keywords

Reference

De Ridder, S. (in revision). Social networking sites and mediatized intimacies in youth cultures: New regimes of control. *MEDIA, CULTURE AND SOCIETY.*

Introduction

Intimacy in the everyday lives of young people has undergone significant changes during the last two decades. Scholars have written about the transforming meanings of intimacy and the way shifting notions of intimacy affect interpersonal relations, as well as how gender, sexuality and romance are currently understood. Examples of meta reflections are recent ideas on the democratization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992; Weeks, 2007), and informalization (Wouters, 2007) of intimacy, while others have coined metaphors such as 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003) and 'cold intimacies' (Illouz, 2007) to capture the specificities of intimacy in current culture. This article will investigate the transformation of intimacy related to the increasing use of social media applications, such as social networking sites (SNSs), especially among young people. While SNSs are a specific popular medium in Western youth cultures, this paper will deal with broader media culture and illustrate how particular understandings of the media have the *power* to shape communicative interactions that, in turn, give meaning to intimacy (Hepp, 2012). Earlier work has linked transforming intimacies to the shift from interpersonal oral communication to use of digital media applications with specific technological structures and affordances (Schwarz, 2011). However, the specific role of *media culture* and people's *ideas about the media* are often overlooked.[1] Therefore, this contribution serves as an illustration of the current mediatization of intimacy; how the social and cultural organization of intimacy is affected by an increasing media presence in the everyday lives of young people

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[1] Schwarz (2011) coins the concept of 'network intimacy' to argue how disclosure and closeness take place under new conditions (ibid.: 83). He argues how specific affordances of instant messaging software give room for a new intimate sociability. Mainly the objectification, 'proof' and 'evidence' are important in intimate instant messaging conversations.

(Longhurst, 2007). To that end, these insights draw broader upon a four-year research project (2010-2014) on youth, digital media culture and intimacy. Earlier research papers have been published elsewhere (De Ridder, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013).

To examine this dynamic, this paper investigates young social media audiences' opinions, beliefs and knowledge through *intimate storytelling* in social media. Drawing on the sociology of Ken Plummer (1995, 2003), intimate stories are understood as *communicative interactions* that give meaning to gender, sexuality and romantic relationships. In SNSs, these intimate stories become *self-representations* making use of a software platform to communicate them; intimate stories as self-representations are therefore mediated stories with particular symbolic powers that affect audiences' interpretations (Thumim, 2012). Drawing on the observation that young audiences continuously questioned the authenticity of self-representational intimate stories in popular SNSs, this paper will expose how these *regimes of authenticity* are inextricably intertwined with the mediation of intimate stories on SNSs. Through reporting on how young audiences performed authenticity when talking about intimate storytelling in popular SNSs,[2] this paper argues that new regimes for controlling intimacy in young people's daily experience is increasingly intertwined with current media culture (Couldry, 2012). Linking this evolution specifically to the emergence of digital media and communication technologies, I argue that intimate lives experienced through digital media, such as social networking sites, are not only limited to being disciplined by discourse, representation and subjectivity (see 1975/1995; Foucault, 1976/1998), but rather ideas about communicative interactions in digital and participatory media illustrate how power in a society of control (see Deleuze, 1992) puts 'the authentic self' central within the frame. Consequently, individuals are strongly involved in their self-disciplining (Best, 2010, p. 9). As communicative interactions, intimate storytelling practices in SNSs are controlled by continuous beliefs 'about how a medium communicates and structures communication,' which Ilana Gershon (2010) refers to as *media ideologies*. The control over intimate storytelling practices in SNSs is

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2   The illustrations in this article draws on eight focus groups (Lindlof & Bryan, 2011) with young people in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium between twelve and nineteen years-old, conducted between November 2011 and February 2012. In total, there were 51 participants who all had at least one active social media profile. This paper will use quotes as illustrations for the ideas that will be developed. I will identify participants of the focus groups with a pseudonym, followed by the age (XX y.o.), gender (M/F) and the focus group number (FGX) in which the person participated.

therefore not only situated within the message itself, 'but in people's understanding of the media.' Therefore, the 'meaning resources' that are intertwined with one's authentic intimate self in current Western youth cultures are mediated through technical communications media (Hepp, 2012, pp. 70-71). Overall, the mediatization of intimacy and connected regimes of authenticity in young people's everyday life worlds illustrates how media cultures have become a primary resource for the social and cultural organization of gender, sexuality and relationships.

This paper is primarily interested in the ethico-political consequences of regimes of authenticity and media ideologies among young social media audiences (Bakardjieva, 2010). Thereby, authenticity is understood as being shaped and defined by society, relying on cultural norms and intelligibility (Grazian, 2010). The 'real me' as culturally defined, relies on fixed intimate identity positions that are used to discipline and control other people's intimacies and desires (Butler, 1990/2006; Ingraham, 2005; Santore, 2011); these positions then threaten political diversity and multiplicity in the everyday (mediated) lives of young people. First, I will introduce how social media audiences construct authentic intimate selves by starting from their own *personal selves* as arbiters (van Zoonen, 2012). Second, authentic intimacy will be exposed as a paradox in SNSs as audiences recognize performance/ entertainment as important on social media profiles, while at the same time they demand a high degree of authenticity/realness. This paradox is the ultimate way of controlling intimate storytelling practices in youth cultures; in the third part this will be specifically related to media ideologies. Further, by reflecting on current media literature on 'identity management', I will argue how this authenticity paradox has to be situated within a broad cultural understanding of normative ideas on how people should behave online. Last, the conclusion will draw on the political consequences related to living an intimate life in which digital media is omnipresent. I will argue that mediation processes and media cultures should be acknowledged as essential aspects of young people's everyday intimate practices (Deuze, 2012). Acknowledging intimate storytelling as a *popular media practice* recognizes the potential

within mediation and mediatization processes, without automatically problematizing them.

Social media audiences constructing authentic intimate selves

To begin, we should first define 'authentic intimate selves' and how they relate to social media audiences. Further, I will argue that the construction of authentic intimate selves is a challenge for progressive intimate politics in everyday life, as they are a central mechanism to control intimacy at particular moments and in particular settings.

Authenticity refers to something 'real' or 'genuine' and stands in contrast to 'an imitation or a copy' (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 392). Inextricably intertwined with modern times, and as numerous self-help books communicate, authenticity is in its essence a modern quest for self-discovery, self-realization and individuality. Moreover, authenticity is understood as an 'inherent quality of some object, person or process' (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 2), and as Charles Guignon (2004) explains in his book *On Authenticity,* something that is told we can 'achieve'. Initially appropriated to counter alienation related to 19th-century industrialization, authenticity is philosophically related to existentialism (see Heidigger on 'being-in-the-world' and 'Dasein' in *Being and Time*); that is to say, authenticity is a project of remaining loyal to the self (Smelik, 2011, p. 77). However, upon accepting that authenticity is socially constructed rather than an 'inherent quality', it can then be understood in current cultures as an 'evaluative concept' (Vannini & Williams, 2009, p. 3) that is linked to people's experiences in everyday life. Taking a sociological approach, David Grazian (2010, pp. 191-192) argues it is a moral construct, which is not 'value free', but connotes 'legitimacy' and 'social value'. He emphasizes the importance of 'demystifying' authenticity and makes a plea to deconstruct and challenge the performance of authenticity 'as tradition-bound, pretentious, and essen-

tialist'. Thereby, he describes authenticity as the 'cultural myth of our time' (Grazian, 2010, p. 199).

Performing authentic intimacy then should be understood as first evoking essentialism and second, authentic intimacy links the intimate self with larger cultural processes. Although intimacy in everyday life is known as something that occurs rather than something that is fixed, this multiplicity is often seen as inauthentic (O'Brien, 1999). The social and cultural organization of intimacy in current cultures, as criticized by critical social constructionist scholars and queer theorists, needs approval by an authority to be accepted (Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 393). This system of authority, as a particular sense of authenticity, could be understood in relation to intimacy within the heterosexual matrix as developed by Judith Butler (1990/2006). The heterosexual matrix, which became known as the system of heteronormativity (Warner, 1991), argues that performances of sex/gender/desire need to cohere in order to be intelligible. Moreover, binary constructions of gender and sexual identity (Ingraham, 2005; Santore, 2011), fixed ideas about the organization of relationships and romantic love (Illouz, 2007) are the core of this authoritative system. From a postmodern feminist perspective, Angela McRobbie (1994, p. 70) argues in the following passage that, when authentic intimacy is seen from the position of 'the real me', it is problematic from an ethico-political perspective:

> The "real 'respectable' me" is also the product of a certain kind of psychoanalytical violence where desire is also constrained and endlessly defined in culture around the tropes of heterosexuality. Not being at one with this "real me" has produced much pain and suffering and has required, on the part of gay men and lesbian women, enormous effort to construct different kinds of subjectivity.

The authentic intimate self puts 'the me' as the arbiter, central within this process of authority to the larger cultural process of heteronormativity. Conversely, knowledge-based institutions that regulate intimacy through representations, significations and identifications are becoming

less important (Ruffolo, 2009). This Foucauldian (1975/1995, 1976/1998) disciplining of intimacy is gradually making more room for societies of control, which, as argued by Gilles Deleuze (1992, p. 4) 'are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies.' Although subjectivity and self-discipline are still relevant in societies of control, 'the institutional sites that held this disciplinary gaze have been dissolved, leading to an even more dispersed form of surveillance' (Best, 2010, p. 9). Using the emergent truth claims in popular and political culture as examples, Liesbet van Zoonen (2012, p. 60) coins the metaphor *I*-Pistemology to describe how people 'have turned to themselves as an alternative source of knowing and understanding.' She explains how *I*-pistemology puts the self in the center of all knowledge.

> Where epistemology is concerned with the nature, sources and methods knowledge, then *I*-pistemology answers these questions from the basis of *I* (as in me, myself) and *I*dentity, with the *I*nternet as great facilitator.

Related to evolutions in digital media and communication technologies, I am suggesting that what is understood as *I*-pistemology plays out in how social media audiences make sense of intimacy communicated through different intimate storytelling practices that give meaning to gender, sexuality and relationships. Increased opportunities for participation in media like SNSs have led to new self-reflexive 'intimate disclosures' that challenge the heteronormative and binary subjectivities; thus, the disciplining of intimacy as a knowledge-based institution has also eroded (see for example Pullen, 2009, p. 9). However, this new freedom has also made room for continuously evaluating other people's intimate storytelling practices. As I observed, particularly among youth, this form of control was often performed during focus group discussions, mainly when asked to reflect on others peers' self-representations of intimate relationships and self-portraits in popular SNSs profiles. For example, in one focus group discussion in this study, Kim, a thirteen year-old girl and Lotte, a 14-year-old girl, discussed whether it is 'ok' to

post a picture on your SNS profile in which you are kissing your lover. In a similar discussion about what is 'ok' to reveal, Joran, a 16-year-old boy, discusses his thoughts on pictures of boys who like to 'show off' on their profiles.

Kim, F, 13 y.o., FG3	I would never put that on Facebook, hehe... Or take such a picture, but ok, if people want this then, then ok.
Lotte, F, 14 y.o., FG4	Eeeuh, I think... I would never do this myself, I mean, not everyone should see how you kiss [everybody else laughs] that's like...
Joran, M, 16 y.o., FG3	If he wants to and if he wants to get comments like: [another boy joins in choir with a low voice] "GAYYYY." But for me, I don't bother.[3]

Interestingly, while accepting there is a diversity of intimate storytelling practices on popular social media websites, audiences made continuous references to *themselves*, which is linked to a 'popular desire to identify 'real selves' that are true, single and consistent' (van Zoonen, 2013, p. 46). Consequently, this form of authenticity as an audience performance reinforces essentialist beliefs rather than abandoning them; discursive disciplining is replaced by peer control over communicative actions in mediated environments. As Grazian (2010, p. 192) argues, 'Audiences may employ a range of ambiguous criteria when evaluating the symbolic efficacy of such authenticity performances, which can lead to controversy.' So then how should we understand this ambiguity?

Exposing paradoxes and control over intimacy

Exposing this ambiguity further, I will rely on paradoxes of authenticity that young audiences constructed when reflecting on intimate storytelling practices in popular social media. In sum, I want to show how young people are making sense of intimacy while relying on their perceived beliefs of what constitutes social media and how to behave within these environments. Their specific beliefs about how to act in social media illustrate how intimacy in the mediatized life-worlds of young people is

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3   The comments in this paper are translated from Dutch to English for practical reasons. Therefore, it must me acknowledged that, although translation was as literally as possible, some meanings and subtleties are lost.

connected to a media culture. Further, a media culture can be defined as 'collections of sense-making practices whose main recourses of meaning are the media' (Couldry, 2012, p. 159). In (digital) media cultures, authenticity and 'the real me' seem to be inextricably intertwined with one's online life.

Authenticity has been understood as important in the construction of self-identity in everyday life, but also more specific in youth cultures, it is related to the expanse of subcultures. However, the proliferation of authenticity as an everyday life quest is often seen as a consequence of a 'mediated reality' becoming pervasive, making people crave for 'the real' (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In terms of the connection between technology and online life, clinical psychologists like Sherry Turkle (2011) are worried about our increasingly strong (inauthentic) intimate relationships with machines. Further, Turkle argues that online life inhibits authenticity in a problematic way. Strikingly, in *contrast* to what these emerging concerns would make us expect, young social media audiences are known from earlier research to think of authenticity as very important for their online identities through expressing authentic relationships with others, but also wanting their profiles to be the same 'as in real life' (Van Cleemput, 2008). Audiences see indexical media tools, like pictures, as important because they signal 'the real me' and an embodied identity (Mallan, 2009). Recently, Fatimah Awan and David Gauntlett (2013) showed how young people's negotiated use of SNSs in their everyday lives related to three areas, among which is 'privacy and authenticity' (next to 'connecting and convenience' and 'openness and control'). Young people criticized relationships formed through SNSs as inauthentic, mainly because of the 'nature of the medium through which they were connecting' (ibid., p. 125). This controversy and cynical attitude regarding the realness of online friendships, people's self-representations and disclosure of privacy, is a reiteration of what media scholars observed among audiences of popular reality-based television shows. Paradoxes such as the 'more *entertaining* a factual programme is' and 'the more *performance*', 'the less real it appears to viewers' (Hill, 2005, p. 57), seem also true for social media audiences [my emphasis].

Annette Hill (2005, p. 78) states that audiences choosing to deconstruct the paradoxes and 'truth claims' of reality-TV is actually 'healthy for the development of the genre', yet the paradox between performance/entertainment and authenticity/realness in SNSs is more problematic. I noticed how this binary opposition became the primary mechanism of control through making *I*-pistemological claims about 'good' versus 'bad' intimate storytelling practices. When talking with young people about finding a possible lover on social media, pictures seemed to be the most important tool to communicate 'authenticity'. Therefore, it was made clear that pictures had to be 'spontaneous' rather than 'posed.' Further, discussions developed about manipulating pictures using popular editing software like Photoshop, but also pictures taken as close-ups, showing only fragmented parts of the body, were seen as bad performances used by those craving to be 'popular'.

Evy, F, 15 y.o., FG5	More natural, not a picture where you are posing too much. A spontaneous picture of yourself and ... more normal. If you have a slutty picture on ... Distinguished guys will know and they will not be interested.
Joran, M, 16 y.o., FG3	I told myself, ok, I want to meet that girl at the station, I saw the girl and thought by myself 'oooh no'. All her pictures were Photoshopped. Of course, I'm not only interested in looks, but they have to make themselves known how they actually are.

Other than personal pictures, representations on SNSs profiles of intimate relationships were also discussed. Young people emphasized how you should carefully manage the public/private balance and only mention stable and long-lasting relationships on your SNSs profile.

Simon, M, 16y.o., FG6	Some people are really pushing the limits, they take a picture of a boy and the girl in bed, under the sheets, and then [Tom interrupts]
Tom, M, 16 y.o., FG6	... That is none of our business

| Ward, M, 17 y.o., FG7 | [...] Anyway I think ..., I think this is something for outside of Facebook [Indicating who you are in a relationship with]. I think this is a bit too... too intimate to share with people. Sometimes you see people changing relationship statuses and then they go like 'congratulations' and when it's over, 'ouch' and 'how come?' I think most friends on Facebook should not be involved in this. |

Important in these observations is that outspoken ideas about 'good' and 'bad' intimate storytelling practices are gendered, but also heavily rely on fixed ideas about the organizations of intimate relationships. It was mentioned many times how bad it was for girls to look like 'sluts' and boys to show themselves as 'playboys'. Moreover, intimate relationships on SNSs are viewed as complex performances, which are at the same time public and private, fixed, but also continuously open for possible re-negotiations. Interestingly, the knowledge those young people expressed of which they themselves were the arbiters to control intimate perform-ances in SNSs by cataloguing them as 'good' or 'bad', came in continuous *conflict* with the fact that intimate storytelling on SNSs is a popular media practice of audiences in which entertainment, spectacularizing and aesthetics are essential (Longhurst, 2007). When talking about attractive SNSs profile, nice pictures were usually mentioned as very important. This observation shows how pictures – other than referring to an indexcal embodiment – are important content to attract people to SNSs profiles.

Leen, F, 14 y.o., FG2	Euh, I usually look at the pictures first, and then hobbies, and what he is doing.
Jan, M, 14 y.o., FG2	Yeah, we need to have the same interests, and ... yeah the pictures have to be beautiful as well.

In relation to intimate storytelling, a mediated subject is fundamen-tally *troubled* in social media, as the struggle between performance/entertainment and authenticity/realness has to be continuously consid-ered. Examples of such struggles are how having 'beautiful' pictures in which you look your best need to also be 'real' and 'spontaneous'. Other aspects of intimacy, like relationships, should be kept private, while at the same time communicating them online to the public is necessary to make them 'official' (see also Ito, et al., 2010, pp. 118-148)

Els, F, 16 y.o., FG6	On Facebook it's more clearly made visual; 'in a relationships', then it's official. But of it's not there, it's not really official.

As young people's intimacies are audienced and intertwined with media cultures, new ways of controlling intimacy are emerging. In relation to intimate storytelling, I have shown how this control is situated within the very paradox of authenticity and the idea of 'the real me'. Thereby, young people make references to authorative regimes that socially and culturally organize gender and sexuality identities in their specific youth cultures. Further, how people make sense of the medium itself as a *media ideology* is equally important to further consider.

Exposing media ideologies

The struggle between performance/entertainment and authenticity/realness when evaluating intimate storytelling practices of peers typifies how power operates within control societies. Multiple and contested ideas of 'good' versus 'bad' intimate storytelling practices were shared during the focus group discussions, whereby continued reflections about how to be an 'authentic intimate self' in SNSs was also central. In this section, I will discuss how this form of control is not only related to the actual content of SNSs. More than referring to normative/authoritative ideas of gender, sexuality and relationships, the young people in this study expressed 'a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning. That is to say, what people think about the media they use will shape the way they use media' (Gershon, 2010, p. 3). In her anthropological account on breaking up romantic commitments over new media, Ilana Gershon (2010) argues how media ideologies are important to understand how the breakup message becomes meaningful. Central to this idea is that particular media, such as SNSs, structure communicative interactions by technology and software designs, which could be referred to as *affordances* (Hutchby, 2001). Technical communication media and the institutions operating them are often overlooked as actors in this process (De Ridder, 2013a). However, they should be seen as

important facilitators in the struggle between performance/entertainment and authenticity/realness, which has become a central way of controlling the intimate storytelling practices of peers. However, it needs to be emphasized that the McLuhanian idea of the medium itself becoming the message is not what is meant here. Rather, the social interpretations and how people interact with and appropriate media like SNSs in their everyday lives is important here. Referring to the 'moulding forces' of media, Andreas Hepp (2012) argues that these interpretations and appropriations are the very ways in which media become ' "powerful" in interwoven practices' (ibid., p. 60). The 'shaping actions' of young people's intimacies moulded by technical communications media is the very core of the mediatization process and illustrates how media cultures have become a primary resource for the social and cultural organization of gender, sexuality and relationships in young people's life-worlds (Krotz & Hepp, 2011).

Illustrations of how media have become interwoven in making intimate storytelling practices seem less 'authentic' and 'real' can be observed on the level of ideas people have about different social media websites. While most of the participants in the focus groups used Facebook, the Northern Belgium SNS market has the popular alternative Netlog. Netlog, in contrast to Facebook, is a SNS that markets itself as a social media website on which you can get to know new people. Using a more colorful design that is less business-like than Facebook and allowing anonymous nicknames, Netlog's focus on entertainment, popularity and performance was seen among the participants within this study as something to be avoided. The website, which was often nicknamed 'Sletlog' (which is Dutch for 'Slutlog'), became known, because of its specific affordances, as a dating website (De Ridder, 2013a). Interestingly, all kinds of intimate storytelling practices on Netlog became much more likely to be judged as 'bad practices' than on Facebook. In this sense, the ideas young people have about how this medium, and more specifically its marketing and software design structures' communicative practices, contributed to the judging of their peers' intimate storytelling practices. Although the young people mentioned numerous

'bad' intimate storytelling practices on Facebook as well, Netlog's inauthentic image created more pervasive judging. Further, this example illustrates how online anonymity and disclosing a 'real' identity is inextricably intertwined with being authentic in social media environments (Lovink, 2012).

A second illustration of the importance of media ideologies is that not only social media websites as a place have a meaning, but also the very specific ways in which intimate stories are mediated has important consequences in terms of the way they are interpreted in relation to authenticity and suitability. As previously mentioned, the specific ways pictures are produced matters. As a general rule, the more a picture is consciously posed (but also the more pictures are edited to make them more beautiful, entertaining or fun), the less real they will be to the audience. In the following example, a girl explains how the distance maintained from the camera lens often exposes the performed nature of such a picture, which often communicates the 'wrong' message.

Sofie, F, 15 y.o., FG5	But also not [placing pictures] in close-up. If it is from a distance, it is a real difference than only the mouth, that's ... Yeah, if it [the picture] would be from a distance, this would be better.

The concept of remediation, which was initially coined by Richard Grusin and David Bolter (1998), argues how humans are relying more and more on mediation. Remediation can be explained as follows: 'Ideas about what one can do in one medium are always implicitly understood in terms of what one can do in every other medium available' (Gershon, 2010, p. 5). As audiences seem to be interested in making intimate stories 'as real' as possible, they continuously strive for maximum immediacy, that is making mediation transparent and invisible, while the exact opposite, hypermediation, calls attention to the actual mediation process through which the performance of the producer becomes exposed in a way that is too obvious. In relation to the example of the close-up picture, the constructed and therefore hypermediated nature is clearly brought to the fore. As a media-related practice, such hypermediation in SNSs is clearly judged as a 'bad' intimate storytelling practice. This

is also illustrated in how not only the actual performance matters, but also how the quantity of SNS-related content is also part of media ideologies. For example, Lotte, a 14-year-old girl, distanced herself from people posting too many posed pictures.

Lotte, F, 14 y.o., FG4	There are a lot of people who have so many pictures, but also professional pictures. They place them on their news feeds, but also other pictures, and really a lot of pictures, with their own camera, in mirrors, in dressing rooms...

Media ideologies are important to consider in current mediatized cultures, as they are specific mechanisms of power. Media ideologies in relation to storytelling practices in social media were multiple and contested, which illustrates how these sources of knowledge made continuous reflections departing from the *self* as arbiter to decide between 'good' and 'bad' online behavior, rather than a coherent disciplinary regime in which only certain media-related intimate storytelling practices are understood as intelligible. The continuous struggle in which mediated subjects have to consider whether they are being as authentic as possible, while at the same time maintaining a positive self-representation in their SNS identity adds everyday complexities to the intimate lives of young people. As popular social media platforms are intertwined with the everyday, people are participating in forms of media that extend far beyond their computer screens. Therefore, these controlling media ideologies on intimacy shape actions broadly oriented towards media. Consequently, a continuous imagined *audience* can become an important controlling social actor as surveillance through participatory networked media becomes 'asymmetrical' and 'nontransparent' (Andrejevic, 2006). These moments of control and the way young people are continuously made aware of them were illustrated numerous times during the talks with young people in the focus group research. As participant Tom was discussing why he would never place a picture of himself on Facebook stripped to the waist, another participant confronted him with an inconsistency.

Sam, M, 17 y.o., FG6	No, I have seen a picture of him [pointing to Tom] stripped to the waist with a pink background and a hat.
Tom, M, 16 y.o., FG6	[responds quickly] This picture was taken in the room of Lore… we were in the pool, there was a party in the house of some girl. The picture was taken then.

These specific moments of control, which are related to networked social media in this example, are postmodern forms of control (Lyon, 2001). Moments such as these are able to construct the awareness of a surveilling audience, which in turn becomes an imagined actor in everyday life. Therefore, as argued by Deleuze, self-control becomes a central mechanism in control societies (Best, 2010), even more so than when the self is governed by regulating institutions that control intimacy by socially and culturally organizing gender, sexuality and relationships.

Scary media literacies

As mentioned earlier, the construction of 'authentic intimate selves' is a challenge for progressive intimate politics in everyday life; authenticity is an evaluative concept that has the ability to reinforce essentialist beliefs related to gender, sexual and intimate identities. As I have illustrated, in contemporary media cultures in which SNSs among young people are very popular applications, specific regimes of authenticity become meaningful. Continuous moments of control that are multiple and contested are related to media ideologies. In essence, these media ideologies in relation to intimate storytelling demand maximum immediacy when creating content on SNSs; intimacy has to be as unmediated as possible. Audiences start from their personal positions to evaluate intimate storytelling practices as 'good' or 'bad', which emerge in troubled mediated subjects who continually struggle between performance/entertainment and authenticity/realness.

This very struggle through which intimate politics in the mediatized life-worlds of these young people resides, corresponds to a broader

societal belief about how to behave appropriately in online media environments. These politics are often communicated in current popular opinions about media literacies, such as the 'field' of 'online identity management.' As I noticed how these young social media audiences continuously described authenticity in the focus groups, they reproduced essential current 'cultural tensions and conflicts around identity' (van Zoonen, 2013). The current obsessions with online authenticity (Lovink, 2012), often discussed in numerous self-help books on identity management in SNSs, is what I would call *scary media literacies* that dominate current cultural understanding of online behaviour. They are scary for three reasons. First, such literacies construct the idea of an existing 'real' and 'fixed self', rather than being open to the multiple dynamic ways identities – especially intimate identities – are lived in everyday life. Second, these ideas are guided by 'state and corporate interest' (van Zoonen, 2013, p. 45) as a single identity is more controllable for various reasons, such as state border control, but is also controllable by marketing. For example, self-help books dealing with 'managing your online identity' and 'reputation management' often transfer ideas about corporate branded identities to how personal 'ordinary' individuals should behave online, which can be problematic to non-corporate users of SNSs. Third, these literacies ignore how intimate storytelling as a popular media practice – and more general all self-representation in SNSs – is in its very essence about performing, spectacularizing and entertaining an audience (Longhurst, 2007). By only focusing on realness and authenticity, they reinforce the performance/entertainment and authenticity/realness struggle as an unhelpful binary through which mediated subjects become troubled. Furthermore, this widely constructed binary approach regulates moments of control, as it is used to judge 'good' versus 'bad' online behaviour. Taking authenticity as a central guidance in networked media environments involves the risk of being prone to compulsive self-surveillance and fear of an imagined audience.

However, at the same time, it has to be acknowledged that a demand for more online authenticity and transparency is valuable, certainly in relation to reducing harm for children and young people online; as not

using real names and operating anonymously often corresponds with being more at-risk and vulnerable (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). As Allesandro Ferrara (2002) argues, authenticity can be reflective in a way that it acknowledges that being 'authentic' and 'real' is defined socially and culturally. A reflective judgement of authenticity recognizes pluralism, rather than a unified universalism (ibid., p. x). In relation to intimacy in the mediatized life-worlds of young people, dealing with regimes of authenticity in online social media has become increasingly important. I argue that the positive evaluations young social media audiences have constructed about an 'authentic intimate self' is not problematic as such. Rather, this only becomes problematic in the continuously constructed paradoxical binary between performance/entertainment and authenticity/realness.

Conclusion

The politics of intimacy in the everyday lives of young people have always been complex, however, as a mediated practice in SNSs, specific *new regimes for controlling* intimacy have emerged; discursive disciplining has come to be accompanied by intensive peer control over communicative interactions that give meaning to gender, sexuality and relationships. People's ideas about the media have given rise to media ideologies and therefore have the power to shape a range of intimate interactions broadly oriented towards media. This paper showed how young social media audiences' controlled intimacy departs from their own individual positions in multiple and contested ways. The remediation of intimate storytelling steeped in a paradox between demanding maximum immediacy through authenticity/realness on the one hand, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of performance/entertainment in a social media environment.

Beyond being isolated within youth cultures, I argue that the authenticity paradox relies on a broad cultural understanding of how peo-

ple should behave in social media environments. In particular, media literacies, which are based on 'identity management', mirror current cultural obsessions with fixing a fragmented self, rather than acknowledging diversity. As young people live out their intimacies using media, the politics of intimacy have to be reconsidered in relation to media ideologies in Western cultures. In his recent work *Media Life*, Mark Deuze (2012) argues that political diversity in media is threatened in relation to 'the process and practice of self-identification, self-branding and subsequent self-creation in media.' This is 'as we end up with becoming the person everybody else expects them to be' (ibid., p. 242). Indeed, as young social media audiences continuously perform authenticity, the risk of compulsive self-surveillance and fear of an imagined audience increases. People seem to demand an unreasonable degree of realness in mediated environments. Deuze continuous to argue that in essence, the problem is that we keep separating media as outside of the real.

> The problem, however, is that we keep convincing ourselves and others that elements of our life in media are either good or bad for us, failing to witness what is already taking place. In other words: people experience the on-going mediation and mediatization of their lives, but seem to remain blind to its profound potential (ibid. p.257).

Multiple and contested opinions among young social media audiences through which intimate storytelling practices were evaluated as good or bad, continuously referred to media ideologies. As I observed how the mediation of intimate storytelling in an entertaining and spectacularizing way was heavily refuted and seen as socially undesirable, the potential exists to redefine intimate storytelling in social media – and broader self-representation – as a *popular media practice*.

Reframing young people's self-representational intimacies as popular media practices embraces the political potentialities within these online spaces. Instead of continuously focusing on *being* authentic, real and normal, popular spaces allow room for *becoming* intimate. Intimate storytelling as a popular media practice acknowledges media cultures

as an essential part of our everyday lives, in which experiments with mediated fictions in shaping our identities do not have to be automatically seen as 'bad practices.' A broader cultural understanding of the potentialities by recognizing mediation through performing, spectacularizing and using popular aesthetics,[4] transcends the authenticity paradox as the ultimate way of control in which diversity in young people's intimate cultures is currently threatened.

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4   Note that I refer to 'recognizing the popular,' as I refrain from a straightforward celebration of 'the popular'.
    This is because I recognize the hegemonic structures in which the popular and broader media cultures operate.

CONCLUSION

Youth, social media and intimacy as unfolding intimate media cultures

This dissertation has contributed to the conceptualisation, theoretical and empirical understandings of what it means to live intimacies in youth cultures and in societies where there is a ubiquitous social media presence drawing on the articulation of processes, actors and practices (as visualised in Figure 1 in theoretical chapter two). Thereby, my theoretical inquiry defined four processes of significance (representation, subjectivity, participation and technology), around which I disentangled the mediating work of SNSs. Mediation is foremost a transformative process in which symbolic powers and politics, media institutions and audiences play a role to explore the wider social and cultural processes that media are constituting (Martín-Barbero, 1993; Silverstone, 2002). I have explored intimate storytelling as a communicative interaction in everyday life, as an embodied human activity that gives meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships and desires, and as increasingly becoming media-related. Social media are contributing to the current endless flows of intimate stories in youth cultures, wider culture and society; these flows are productions of intimate stories, circulations within complex networked structures, interpretation or reception and recirculation in culture and society (Couldry, 2008, p. 380). The processes of representation, subjectivity, participation and technology involved around

the coming into existence of these flows of intimate stories give rise to specific media practices, organised around audiences and media institutions as significant actors. Within this dissertation, I have identified self-representation, software design, opportunity structures for participation and appropriation as specific media practices, which are attached to intimate storytelling as communicative interactions in social media. The empirical chapters are clearly showing that these specific media practices are not neutral intermediators, but rather they organise and co-construct intimate stories in particular ways; through performativity, materialisation and the reorganisation of audiences. Performativity is foremost politically significant in its iterability, through constructing repetitive citations of particular fixed intimate identities and biographical statements within software designs, which are created by designers working for media industries (Cover, 2012). Performativity also plays out in the continuous demands of social media wanting people to produce more content and more stories in order to be allowed into online socialising (Thumim, 2012). Further, materialisation connects these fixed intimate identities to the continuous reconstructions of authentic intimate bodies through focusing on visual representations of the real self (van Doorn, 2011). These particular processes of performativity and materialisation are examples of commercial and popular social media institutions' cultural powers that organise online identities in particular ways and are connected to social media's market powers to make a profit out of organising people's data (van Dijck, 2013). Further, the intensification of being an audience in an everyday life related to the presence of social media, relates to more performance, spectacle and narcissism in social behaviour (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), the reorganisations of groups of people as participatory audiences (Livingstone, 2012) and imagined collectives who are increasingly difficult to get under control in daily interactions (Litt, 2012). Social media places are extensions of everyday life spaces (Postill, 2008), adding extra layers of meaning. Consequently, social media places have become significant in the exploration of dynamics related to peer group inclusion and exclusion among teenagers; as these media are a part of young people's everyday lives,

they may demand specific strategies and tactics related to social acceptance within young people's peer groups (Warrington & Younger, 2010). In sum, we could say that social media have gained a part into how young people experience their intimate social life-worlds in contemporary Western youth cultures.

It should be clear that I see the power of social media in young people's everyday lives, specifically in the shaping of their intimate storytelling practices, not as situated within a particular powerful ideological centre, or in a particular group of audiences or digital media industries. This dissertation was concerned with the exploration of the dynamics of gender, sexuality, relationships and desires. Rather than focusing on structural oppositions within young people's intimate storytelling practices in social media, I focused on media and the dynamics of social and cultural change (Hartley, 2012; Longhurst, 2007), exploring to what extent these emerging intimate media cultures allow a plurality of hegemonic contestations, expressions and democratic voicing of difference (Benhabib, 2002; Mouffe, 2005; Thumim, 2012). Hegemonic contestations allow expressions outside of heteronormative constructions, that seek continuous normative coherence between sex, gender, and desire (Butler, 1990/2006; Chambers & Carver, 2008). This dissertation contributed to the understanding of the political dynamics of intimacy in current youth cultures that is subjected to a far reaching mediatisation of modern societies (Hepp, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013; Krotz, 2009). Youth studies, cultural studies, gender studies, media and communication studies have produced many insightful studies related to young people's gender, sexuality, relationships and desires on social media. Therefore, these insightful studies have relied upon different social and cultural meta-processes to make sense of young people's intimacies on social media. First, *individualisation*, which explores societies' demands for more rationally trained, media savvy young people, is related to concerns over youths being at risk in social media (Beck, 1992; Livingstone, 2009). Second, the *sexualisation* of culture (Attwood, 2009) and cultures of sexiness (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010) explores how young girls (and boys, see Siibak (2010) and Manago (2013)) take

part in their own sexualisation through self-objectification (Gill, 2007) or take part in their own agency over their sexuality and gender (Duits & van Zoonen, 2007) on social media. Third, the *commercialisation* of culture (Featherstone, 2007) as related to commodification explores how young people make use of popular mass culture (Kellner, 1995) and aesthetics (Lash & Urry, 1994) to shape their intimate identities on social media.

However, studies relying on these meta-processes of individualisation, sexualisation and commercialisation do not say much about young people's intimacies as lived through social media in culture and society. Therefore, this dissertation has contributed by exploring these processes further as emerging *intimate media cultures of mediatisation*, which I have defined as a way of sense making about gender, sexuality, relationships and desires as lived through the media. These unfolding intimate media cultures explain how particular media may become powerful and interwoven into intimate storytelling practices and intimate socialities. I have explored these unfolding intimate media cultures through interpreting media practices of self-representation, software design, appropriation, and opportunity structures of participation. Moreover, I have focused on popular social media as places to experience intimacy, exposing particular *media ideologies*, which are a set of beliefs in culture and society about specific media (Gershon, 2010a, 2010b). Intimate media cultures of mediatisation have installed an emerging hegemonic struggle into the intimate lives of young people. Intimate life with and in popular social media in Western youth cultures may have the opportunity to stimulate the growth of knowledge and experiences through imagination, creativity, communication, fun and anonymity, teaching young people and allowing them to engage with the diversity of genders, sexualities, relationships and desires in societies in positive and stimulating ways (Hasinoff, 2013). However, I have observed emerging regimes of control in intimate media cultures (Best, 2010; Deleuze, 1992). These emerging regimes of control relate to specific media ideologies in culture and society; normative and essentialist assumptions that believe people's intimate identities have one authentic or real (biological,

genetic) core. Media ideologies have installed particular ideas about how young people should live their intimate identities online to avoid risks by managing their reputations and identities and being as real as possible, rather than allowing identity fragmentation, experimentation and emancipation (van Zoonen, 2013); these media ideologies first of all promote coherence. Numerous moments of control and surveillance, facilitated by digitally networked technologies (Andrejevic, 2006; Lyon, 2001), have installed a regime where transgressing the boundaries of these media ideologies in social media places may come with emotional labour: doubt, anxiety, fear and shame (Lazzarato, 1996; Sender, 2012). Young people, certainly those that identify outside of the heteronormative, pay a cost to manage a high and authentic status in popular social media places and their connected peer groups (Marwick, 2013). Moreover, these emerging regimes of control may have particular consequences for the symbolic politics in social media, leading to heightened self-surveillance and a symbolic annihilation of self-representations that transgress heteronormativity.

Reconstructing a young passionate life with social media

Taking into account recent authoritative publications in the fields of media and cultural studies, which deal with ontological and epistemological questions of what it means to live a life with a ubiquitous media presence in everyday lives (Couldry, 2012; Deuze, 2012; Hartley, 2012), the time has come to think about the future of media and communication studies. The spectrum of what it means to study *the media* in culture and society has changed dramatically because of material, social and cultural changes in modern societies. Therefore, the study of media far outweighs what media studies has perhaps been repeating for too long, such as studies relying on the incorporation/resistance paradigm (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998), coming to not so innovative conclu-

sions that argue audiences are active negotiators of texts, that techno-logical determinism is bad, and that media industries rely on capitalist ideologies. This is not to say these conclusions are wrong or that the situation is different today; however, what has been said is but a repetition of axioms. The media have far outgrown what they used to be, as John Hartley (2012) describes, they are 'enabling social technology', increasingly intertwined with our most intimate and private selves, socialities and life-worlds. Media have become important organising principles in everyday lives, which Hartley compares to what the understanding of the market is for the study of the economy; media studies as a field has the challenging task of answering these questions, evolving to study 'how media contribute to the conditions of knowledge and agency in the world and so to understand better whether media enable us to live well together' (Couldry, 2012, p. 210); an ethics of media has increasingly become an ethics of life in which mediation is a vital process (Kember & Zylinska, 2012).

I have offered reflections in this dissertation about how the media may or may not contribute to an open intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003), as a neutral ground to think about the role of social media into the conditions of knowledge and agency of gender, sexuality, relation-ships and desire in the public and private realms of Western youth cul-tures. My ethical commitment relates to a reconfiguration of how to understand intimate storytelling in social media, as a popular media practice in youth cultures and society. Intimate storytelling as a popu-lar media practice questions current media ideologies that make sense of young people's intimacies in social media as being at risk, in need of more control and management. It acknowledges intimate stories in so-cial media as *media productions of intimacy*, rather than believing that young people present their intimate 'core selves'. Intimate storytelling as a popular media practice should acknowledge young people's self-representations in social media as a particular *genre* (Thumim, 2012) in which the popular is recognised as a source of creativity and fun, experimenting with fictions and multiple selves, and without losing the grounds for an individual ethics and responsibility for what the author

is producing (Butler, 2005).

As young people experience intimacy with social media that are currently dominated by intimate media cultures constructed around authenticity, realness and management, there is a need to reconstruct a young passionate life with social media; passion includes emotions, feelings and affects. Social media are places where we should be able to experience diverse tastes, sentiments and subjective experiences. Passion involves letting people experience mediated spaces as places of *becoming* instead of continuously focusing on *being*; such as being authentic, being at risk, being your real self, being sexualised, being objectified, and so on. In contemporary culture and society, when intimate troubles unfold around young people's intimate media cultures, these troubles seem to struggle between societies and academic ideas about young people's beings versus their engagements with becoming in their intimate everyday lives with social media. The continuous binary struggle between being and becoming is problematic, as its foundations are normative ideas related to intimate identities and exclude any alternatives, other than those the limiting media ideologies demand.

Limitations and closing remarks

This dissertation, particularly its empirical chapters, is a record of a journey, rather than a finished product. My theoretical engagements with practice theory, media and social change developed gradually while writing these research papers. Consequently, the empirical research attached to this dissertation may seem too focused on inquiring about media representations as texts, instead of focusing on broader media-related practices and audiences' interpretations, and instead of focusing on wider experiences of audiences related to the presence of media in everyday life. The theoretical chapters are the outcome of a learning process in which I have gradually learned about the exciting – but also very recent – work that is currently being done in media,

communication and cultural studies to deal with the complexities of current media-driven societies and social media in particular. It is my hope that the systematic conceptualisations have reduced some theoretical complexities that will enable the exploration of new empirical pathways in the future; I expect unfolding intimate media cultures are deemed to trouble culture and society for some time to come.

Some important closing remarks on my theoretical engagements and vocabularies are necessary to end my argumentations. I will draw on the (disturbing) return of the meta-narrative; media practices as related to other practices and life without (social) media.

The return of the meta-narrative?

Defining intimate media cultures as cultures of mediatisation, my commitment to the understandings of changes and transformations in the intimate lives of young people related to social media should not be read as a universal claim about media, youth and intimacy. As I have emphasised in methodological chapter four of this dissertation, we can only understand small mediatised life-worlds (Krotz & Hepp, 2011), without ascribing one particular functionalist logic of the media through which we can understand change. Mediatisation, as a concept to grasp meta-processes of change related to the media, should not be oversimplified as meaning a unitary progress in the lives of people, inextricably intertwined with Western ideals of technological development. I acknowledge postmodern criticism on meta-narratives, as I have invested in relating my theoretical arguments and findings to processes of power, difference, history and culture (Ortner, 2006). Mediatisation sketches, as I have referred to in theoretical chapter three quoting Bruno Latour (2005), 'the bigger picture'. Meta-processes do not see much, but it is my hope that I have shown they can provide a useful metaphor in everyday life and academic discourse (Hepp, 2012, p. 50). As I have argued before, it is probably too soon to understand what is *exactly* changing or continuing in the intimate lives of young people because of social media (Livingstone,

2013), that is, if making such claims is even possible or desirable.

How do media practices relate to other practices?

I have found practice theory useful in explaining some particular complex articulations of processes, actors and practices, in relation to wider culture and society. Practice theory served as a concretisation of mediatisation and as an interpretative method of particular media practices, which I have defined as self-representation, software design, opportunity structures for participation and appropriation. These particular media practices have served as a way of organising my empirical chapters, but they are no more than a particular choice. I could have come up with numerous other media practices that are articulated around the processes and actors I identified. Further, practice theory has obvious limitations; while it could serve as an interpretative method to understand what people are doing with media, there are many politically complex media events in which media practices can be of little assistance (Postill, 2010). Perhaps, one of the bigger challenges drawing on the study of media practices is understanding how much, or how, these media practices exactly relate to everyday practices and their organisations (Couldry, 2010, p. 49). For example, young people use Facebook to institutionalise their relationships, but how much of this media practice relates to the organisation of a wide range of practices that socially constitute these relationships? Such questions remain difficult to answer, but practice theory may at least expose some consequences of the role of media in social practice and everyday life.

Life without (social) media?

Young people's everyday lives are lived with and in social media. Specifically related to the context of Northern Belgium, I have cited some quantitative proof, for example, 99 percent of young people in Flanders

have a computer with Internet connection at home (Jeugddienst & Jeugdwerknet, 2012); but what does this say about the qualitative aspects of young people's (social) media lives? My use of media life does not imply I disavow young people leading heterogeneous media lives; some young people may choose to live a life without (or with only little use of) social media, while some young people may still be hampered in their social media use because of economic (e.g. digital divide), social (e.g. skills) or cultural factors (e.g. media use as subjected to power relation within families). Mark Deuze's (2012) recent claims about how we live our lives in media reflects on people's powerful capacities to transform media into *our media lives*. However, others have argued that media life cannot exist; social and cultural life are not the same as media life (Longhurst, 2007), and others have argued that life without media remains vital (Couldry, 2012).

Although it is vital to acknowledge media lives are heterogeneous, I argue that the concept of 'media life' does not say anything about the particular media devices people use or about the particular activities people do with technological communications media, or the representations people consume. Rather, I see media life as a way of explaining that in Western (youth) cultures, people live in societies where media are omnipresent. In this way, media life is not about the use about of media; but instead, how media are becoming meaningful to people in their everyday lives. For example, youths who choose not to use any kinds of digital media still live with and in these media; they are part of a culture and society in which these media are omnipresent. Therefore, these media will nonetheless be meaningful to these young people. Moreover, these media may still be powerful at moments in their everyday lives; for example, when other peers question these people's lives without (social) media.

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APPENDIXES

As referred to in the methodology, this dissertation contains a CD-R, which consists of the following appendixes:

Appendix 1: Participatory observation (1)

- Database of 200 Netlog profiles
- Overview of the database
- Working Paper containing the quantitative content analysis
- SPSS file containing the quantitative content analysis
- Thematic textual analysis of nicknames, self-introductory texts, and pictures

Appendix 2: Participatory observation (2)

- Database of comments on popular profile pictures
- Textual analysis of the comments

Appendix 3: Focus group interviews

- Transcribed focus groups
- Overview of the focus groups participants
- Interview protocol of the focus groups
- NVivo file containing the analysis and coding structure
- General summary of the focus groups analysis

Appendix 4: Contextual documents

- Consulted Flemish press articles
- Consulted Netlog data
- Expert interview Eveline Vermaesen

DUTCH SUMMARY – NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

Intimiteit en mediacultuur. Een onderzoek naar de intieme leefwerelden van jongeren op sociale netwerksites

Het uitgangspunt van dit proefschrift is de observatie dat in hedendaagse Westerse jongerenculturen, intimiteit steeds meer beleefd wordt met sociale media, en sociale netwerksites in het bijzonder. In het publieke debat wordt hierbij vaak verwezen naar mogelijke problemen die verband houden met het gebruik van sociale media en de gender, seksualiteits- en relatiebelevingen van jongeren. Voornamelijk de steeds complexere relatie tussen intimiteit als een privaat aspect van het sociaal en cultureel leven, naar een meer publieke beleving op grotere schaal, zorgt vaak voor morele vraagstukken waar cultuur en maatschappij niet altijd een antwoord op verwoorden. Dit proefschrift stelt zich tot doel de intimiteitsbeleving van jongeren in relatie tot de complexe hedendaagse mediacultuur, zowel theoretisch als empirisch te onderzoeken. De intimiteitsbeleving van jongeren op sociale media wordt in dit proefschrift behandeld door te vertrekken vanuit de mediapraktijken van jongeren zelf, eerder dan te vertrekken vanuit de heersende morele paniek in cultuur in maatschappij, die focust op spectaculaire risico's verbonden aan intimiteitsbeleving in een online context. In dit proef-

schrift staan, in tegenstelling tot veel voorgaand onderzoek, de dagdagelijkse aspecten van intimiteitsbeleving tot sociale media centraal, zoals de beleving van liefdesrelaties, gender- en seksuele identiteiten. Spectaculaire problemen die maar al te vaak worden aangehaald in het publieke en academische debat zijn bijvoorbeeld het ongewenst in contact komen met seksuele beelden, vreemde personen, cyberpesten, enzoverder. Dit werk situeert zich binnen media, communicatie en culturele studies, die de rol van media beschouwen als een deel van het dagdagelijks leven van mensen, maar meer nog als primordiaal voor het begrijpen van veranderingsprocessen in cultuur en maatschappij. Centraal in dit proefschrift staat het concept van mediatisering als een overkoepelend meta-proces dat bijdraagt aan de transformatie van intimiteit in moderne samenlevingen.

Vooraleer de transformatie van intimiteit in de leefwerelden van jongeren kon begrepen worden in relatie tot mediatiseringsprocessen op meta-niveau, werd vertrokken vanuit een niet-media-gecentreerde aanpak. Daarbij werd intimiteit vooreerst beschouwd als een vorm van symbolische en communicatieve interactie die betekenis geeft aan gender, seksualiteit, relaties en verlangen. In het proefschrift wordt verwezen naar deze sociale praktijk als *intimate storytelling*. De theoretische explorates in dit proefschrift startten met het blootleggen van mediëringsprocessen in relatie tot *intimate storytelling*; welke processen, actoren en mediapraktijken spelen een rol in de transformatie van intimiteit als een geleefde sociale realiteit, naar symbolische media-inhouden door gebruik te maken van sociale media? Deze aanpak liet toe de non-lineariteit van mediëringsprocessen te ontleden. Bij het theoretisch en empirisch beschouwen van *intimate storytelling*-praktijken in sociale netwerksites, ging de interesse vooral uit naar politieke dynamieken van macht, ongelijkheid en diversiteit, door gebruik maken van het concept heteronormativiteit. Heteronormativiteit werd in dit proefschrift geduid als een normatieve betekenisgeving aan intimiteit die gebaseerd is op coherentie eerder dan het weerspiegelen van gender, seksualiteit, relaties en verlangens als diverse en gefragmenteerde belevingen. Het heteronormatief systeem werd daarbij beschouwd als (1) een aanname

van heteroseksuele verlangens als standaard, (2) een geheel van regels om te conformeren aan hegemonische heteroseksuele standaarden, en (3) een binair gendersysteem dat mannelijkheid tegenover vrouwelijkheid plaatst. De politieke dynamieken van heteronormativiteit werden onderzocht in relatie tot de mogelijkheden (of niet) die jongeren hebben om een diversiteit aan intieme verhalen te vertellen op populaire sociale netwerksites; in welke mate geven deze sociale mediaomgevingen jongeren een stem om een diversiteit aan intimiteiten te beleven?

Dit proefschrift heeft theoretisch bijgedragen tot het blootleggen van de dynamieken tussen processen, actoren, mediapraktijken, mediacultuur en ruimere maatschappij om op meta-niveau de mediatisering van intimiteit in hedendaagse mediagesatureerde jongerencultuur te begrijpen. In het eerste theoretische hoofdstuk werden op basis van voorgaande onderzoeken, processen van representatie, subjectiviteit, participatie en technologie geïntroduceerd. Deze processen hebben elk specifieke invullingen in de sociale, culturele en mediatheorie, die worden expliciet gemaakt in het proefschrift. Deze vier sociale, culturele en materiële processen gelden verder als basis voor de theoretische en empirische exploraties. Verder worden in het tweede theoretische hoofdstuk significante actoren geïntroduceerd: publieken en media-instituten. De notie publieken staat onder druk door huidige evoluties in media- en communicatietechnologieën, maar dit proefschrift pleit voor een blijvend gebruik van het concept 'publiek'. Eerder dan dat het belang van publieken van media zou afnemen, is er een waarneembare intensifiëring van een dagdagelijkse publieksbeleving, gerelateerd aan sociaal gedrag dat meer en meer in relatie staat tot theatraliteit, spektakel en narcisme. Het publiek wordt in toenemende mate een sterk participerend publiek, waarbij digitale media groepen mensen reorganiseren in complexe communicatienetwerken. Specifiek in relatie tot sociale media, is het ingebeelde publiek een belangrijke sociale actor geworden in het dagelijks leven. Het publiek in communicatie-interacties is steeds meer onzichtbaar en dus oncontroleerbaar, wat sociale angst en een toenemende disciplinering van het eigen gedrag in de hand kan werken. In de leefwerelden van jongeren, spelen deze complexe constructies van het

publiek een steeds grotere rol in relatie tot *peer group* inclusie en exclusie. De tweede actor die in het proefschrift wordt besproken zijn mediainstituten. Sociale media worden vaak niet beschouwd als deel van 'de media' in de samenleving, maar zijn vandaag de dag een belangrijke deel van een creatieve digitale media-industrie. Voor een goed begrip van sociale media en sociale netwerksites als media-instituten, is het noodzakelijk de technologische, marktgerelateerde, en culturele dimensies te begrijpen. Technologische materiële dimensies veruitwendigd in software, de computer en het Internet, spelen een belangrijke rol, maar ontwikkelen zich in relatie tot economische, sociale en culturele dynamieken, maar vooral in relatie tot domesticatie en appropriatie van de gebruiker. Marktgerelateerde dynamieken, of de manier waarop mediainstituten als sociale media geld verdienen, worden gerelateerd aan de culturele macht van deze bedrijven. Met de culturele macht wordt verwezen naar software platformen die sociale mediabedrijven creëren, en daarmee ook op specifieke wijze online socialiteit organiseren. Intieme identiteiten (gender, relatiestatus, etc.) krijgen zo een specifieke invulling. Ook ruimer geven populaire sociale mediabedrijven aan de organisatie van socialiteit en intimiteit een specifieke vorm, zoals bijvoorbeeld door de nadruk te leggen op online authentieke identiteiten, het stimuleren van leden tot het produceren van steeds meer content, enzoverder. Deze processen en actoren werden in het proefschrift samengevat in een theoretisch model aan het eind van het tweede theoretische hoofdstuk, dat uiteindelijk leidt tot vier interpreteerbare mediapraktijken, die vormgeven aan *intimate storytelling* op sociale netwerksites: zelfrepresentatie, het gebruik maken van opportuniteitsstructuren voor participatie, het ontwerpen van software, en appropriatie.

Het derde theoretische hoofdstuk komt tot de kern van dit proefschrift door het definiëren en situeren van intimiteit en mediacultuur. Intieme mediacultuur in relatie tot jongeren en sociale netwerksites wordt begrepen als een betekenisgeving aan gender, seksualiteit, relaties en verlangens als geleefd met media. Het leven met media maakt expliciet dat het hier niet enkel gaat om betekenisgeving door representaties, maar zeer breed georiënteerd naar wat (specifieke) media bete-

kenen in cultuur en maatschappij. Deze specifieke definitie impliceert dat hoe jongeren vorm geven aan intimiteit in sociale media, beïnvloed wordt door intieme mediacultuur. Centraal in intieme mediacultuur staan hegemonische machtsdynamieken, waarnaar wordt verwezen als media-ideologieën. Media-ideologieën geven op specifieke wijze vorm aan intimiteit als beleefd door media door zich te baseren op normen en waarden. Deze normen en waardensystemen staan in relatie tot hoe in cultuur en maatschappij betekenis wordt geven aan een bepaalde mediatechnologie, een bepaald medium (bijvoorbeeld, een specifieke sociale netwerksite), en bepaalde (zelf)representaties. Dit proefschrift draagt bij tot het blootleggen van deze specifieke media-ideologieën in relatie tot de intimiteitsbeleving van jongeren op sociale media, zijnde (1) een discours dat argumenteert dat jongeren hun activiteiten in relatie tot intimiteit en sociale media risicovol zijn, (2) dat een online identiteit dient geconstrueerd te worden rond een authentieke kern van het zelf, en (3) dat (intieme) identiteiten in sociale media dienen gereguleerd en gemanaged te worden om een hoge status te verkrijgen in online omgevingen. Deze media-ideologieën geven elk op niet zo neutrale wijze betekenissen aan gender, seksualiteit, relaties en verlangens. Dit proefschrift argumenteert dat een belangrijk kenmerk van deze media-ideologieën is, dat zij in mindere mate worden gedisciplineerd op het niveau van het subject, maar eerder worden gecontroleerd door het sterk veroordelen van bepaald 'fout' versus 'juist' gedrag in sociale media.

Dit proefschrift introduceert vijf empirische artikels die gepubliceerd, of in revisie zijn in internationale academische tijdschriften. Het empirisch werk binnen dit proefschrift, situeert zich binnen het onderzoeksproject 'The Online Stage. Heteronormatieve zelfrepresentatie en identiteitsconstructies bij jongeren in online communicatie-interacties: een multimethodisch publieksonderzoek' (Bijzonder Onderzoeksfonds Universiteit Gent 2010-2014). De empirische hoofdstukken maken gebruik van diverse kwalitatieve onderzoeksmethoden in de communicatie- en mediastudies, zoals participerende observatie, focusgroepen, documentenanalyse en een expertinterview. Het doel in het empirisch gedeelte was een exploratie van de sociale en culturele organisatie

van de intieme verhalen die jongeren representeren in sociale media, welke betekenis geven aan seksualiteit, gender, relaties, en verlangen. Daarbij focussen de empirische hoofdstukken zich op het onderzoeken van de specifieke mediapraktijken als gedefinieerd in het tweede theoretische hoofdstuk: zelfrepresentatie, het gebruik maken van opportuniteitsstructuren voor participatie, het ontwerpen van software, en appropriatie. Deze praktijken worden onderzocht in articulatie met de gedefinieerde actoren in theoretisch hoofdstuk twee: publieken en media-instituten. Verder focussen de empirische hoofdstukken ook op intieme mediacultuur: de ruimere beleving van intimiteit in relatie tot populaire sociale netwerksites.

De algemene conclusie introduceert een hegemonische strijd, kenmerkend voor hedendaagse intieme mediaculturen in relatie tot jongeren en het gebruik van sociale netwerksites. Enerzijds bieden sociale media waardevolle opportuniteitsstructuren tot emancipatie door de substantiële groei aan kennis, ervaringen en confrontaties met de aanwezige diversiteit aan gender-, seksualiteits-, relatiebelevingen en verlangens in cultuur en maatschappij. Daarbij spelen elementen als verbeelding, creativiteit, communicatie, plezier en anonimiteit een belangrijke rol. Daartegenover staat dat media-ideologieën, eerder dan het promoten van deze opportuniteitsstructuren die zouden kunnen leiden tot emancipatie, een sterke normatieve coherentie bewaken. Deze media-ideologieën manifesteren zich door het disciplineren van intimiteit binnen heteronormatieve kaders, maar meer nog door nieuwe dynamieken van controle; een scherp toezicht in cultuur en maatschappij op goed versus slecht gedrag in sociale media. Deze nieuwe vormen van controle zijn mogelijk problematisch wanneer zij toezicht op het eigen gedrag in de hand werken (*self-surveillance*) en op deze manier een enge betekenis geven aan intieme mediaculturen, maar meer nog aan intimiteit als beleving in het dagelijkse leven van jongeren.

Dit proefschrift eindigt met een voorstel tot reconstructie van intieme mediaculturen zoals zij vandaag begrepen worden in cultuur en maatschappij, met betrekking tot het sociale media gebruik bij jongeren. Centraal staat daarbij het aankaarten van het belang van een

media-ethiek. Een media-ethiek omvat vraagstellingen als; kunnen media bijdragen tot kennis, welke mogelijkheden bieden media tot actief handelen, en hoe kunnen we reflecteren over de bijdrage van media tot aangenaam samenleven in cultuur en maatschappij. Dit proefschrift stelt voor om met betrekking tot jongeren, intimiteit en sociale media, na te denken over een intiem burgerschap als een neutraal concept dat toelaat de huidige eng gedefinieerde media-ideologieën te overstijgen. Daarbij wordt geargumenteerd om intimiteit in relatie tot sociale media te reconstrueren als een populaire mediapraktijk. Intimiteit als een populaire mediapraktijk in sociale media is een specifiek genre van mediaproductie, eerder dan een presentatie van het intieme zelf. Sociale media dienen, als onmisbaar voor het intiem leven van jongeren, ruimte te bieden voor diverse subjectieve ervaringen, passie, en emotie. Op dit moment wordt de beleving van een intiem burgerschap met sociale media gefnuikt door intieme mediaculturen die hun betekenis krijgen door eng gedefinieerde media-ideologieën.