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# From risky behaviour to sexy adventures: reconceptualising young people's online sexual activities

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## ABSTRACT

Western discourses about young people and sexuality centre around the concept of risk. Anxieties have been fuelled by the increasing popularity of social media and practices such as 'sexting' and watching 'sexually explicit' materials online. Research has shown however that such risk discourses mainly serve to moralise about, pathologise and police particular behaviours and children. In order to counter such paternalism, researchers advocated a reconceptualisation of youth not as passive victims, but as active agents who actively negotiate sexual experiences and discourses. In this paper, which is based on ethnographic fieldwork among young people in The Netherlands, I argue that we need a reconceptualisation not only of youth, but also of their sexual practices, especially their online sexual practices. Mobilising an interdisciplinary interaction between critical socio-cultural studies of risk, feminist theory and adventure studies, I propose to reconceptualise these practices as 'adventures' rather than 'risky behaviour'. This opens up possibilities for a more reasoned analysis that acknowledges: (1) the distinction between risks and outcomes of an activity; (2) the constructive potential of risk; and (3) the subjective, dynamic character of risk and pleasure.

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## Introduction

Present day western discourse about young people and sexuality centres around the concept of risk (Chmielewski, Tolman, and Kincaid 2017; Gilbert 2007, 49). Anxieties have been fuelled by the increasing popularity of social media and practices such as 'sexting' and watching 'sexually explicit materials' online (Döring 2009; Livingstone 2011). Fears about young people being harmed reflect and reproduce an image of modern society as a risk society (Beck [1986] 1992) or a digital risk society (Lupton 2016) that faces new, uncertain threats due to technological developments. In addition, academic scholarship about young people's online sexual practices has been dominated by studies showing correlations between these practices and a variety of negative outcomes, often under the heading of risky sexual behaviour.

For example, in their study of 'adolescent sexual risk behaviour on the Internet', Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter (2010, 440) label sexting practices such as sending

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sexual pictures to a person exclusively known online, as 'risky', based on previous research which suggests correlations (although not causality) between these activities and outcomes such as unwanted sexual solicitations, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), misuse of intimate information by others and feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment. Related risks that received considerable attention in relation to young people's sexting practices are reputational damage, bullying, harassment, blackmailing, sexual violence including child pornography and forced prostitution, and even suicide (for an overview, see Karaian and Van Meyl 2015; Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013).

In addition, researchers analysing young people's consumption of sexually explicit material (SEM) have focused in particular on possible harmful outcomes of this practice (Smith and Attwood 2014), including negative effects of 'unwanted exposure' to this material (e.g. Mitchell, Finkelhor, and Wolak 2003), beliefs about women as sex objects (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg 2007, 2009a), sexual uncertainty, positive attitudes towards the presumed problematic practice of uncommitted sex (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg 2008), sexual dissatisfaction (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg 2009b) and addiction with negative effects including erectile problems, difficulty regulating sexual feelings and neuroadaptations, although a recent research shows that the conceptualisation and research behind these claims suffer serious theoretical and methodological shortcomings (Ley, Prause, and Finn 2014). What all these studies have in common is that they present specific activities as being risky, and their outcomes as being unpleasant.

Building on centuries of scholarship about sexual pleasure and danger (e.g. Fine 1988; Vance 1984), feminist researchers have argued that such risk discourses mainly serve to moralise about, pathologise and police particular behaviours and children (Aggleton and Campbell 2000; boyd 2008; Burns 2015; Karaian 2012, 2015; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015; Renold, Ringrose, and Egan 2015; Ringrose et al. 2013; Robinson 2013; Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013). For example, certain sexting images potentially fall foul of child pornography laws, which has resulted in disproportionate legal action against teenagers in several countries (Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013, 307–308). Such interventions ignore the 'subtle negotiation of rights, pleasures and pressures of adolescent sexual exploration' (Ringrose et al. 2013, 307). Also, informal forms of policing, such as discourses that condemn certain activities, have been criticised. For example, according to Burns (2015), negative discourses on selfie taking perpetuate negative feminine stereotypes, thereby legitimising the social disciplining of (young) women.

One of the main strategies that has been used by feminist researchers to counter these paternalistic tendencies and to 'queer' our understanding of young people's online sexual practices (Karaian and Van Meyl 2015) is to foreground young people's own voices, reconceptualising youth as agents who actively interpret and negotiate sexual experiences and discourses. In this paper, which is based on one and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch youth, I argue that we need a reconceptualisation not only of young people, but also of their sexual *practices*, especially their ('risky') online sexual practices. Mobilising an interdisciplinary interaction between feminist theory, critical socio-cultural studies of risk and adventure studies, I propose a reconceptualisation of young people's online sexual practices as *adventures* rather than 'risky behaviours'. I will argue that such a reconceptualisation opens up possibilities for a more positive and reasoned analysis of young people's online sexual activities that acknowledges: (1) the distinction between risks and outcomes of an activity; (2) the constructive potential of risk; and (3) the subjective, dynamic character of risk and pleasure. The aim is to provide a theoretical contribution to feminist theories

about youth, sexuality and social media, and a practical contribution to public debates in de-escalating adult anxieties.

## Methodology

This paper is based on one and a half years of multi- and mixed methods ethnographic fieldwork among young people aged 12–18 in The Netherlands, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. In the qualitative part, participation, observation and conversation were combined to allow for a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973). I conducted online and offline participant observation, 29 interviews and 7 focus group meetings<sup>1</sup> with young people, mainly in the eastern part of the country. Offline participant observation took place in schools, public transport and at theatre shows about sexuality and social media, performed in schools. Online participant observations took place in all online spaces used by research participants, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tumblr and Chatroulette. Young people who were involved in this qualitative part of the research were diverse with regard to gender, age, educational level, ethnic background, sexual preferences/experiences/identifications and religion.

After one year of fieldwork, I developed a survey to analyse how common some of the activities and patterns were.<sup>2</sup> The survey was an extension to previous Dutch surveys about youth, sexuality and social media (de Graaf and Vanwesenbeeck 2006; de Graaf et al. 2012; van de Walle and de Graaf 2010), in the sense that it included a broader range of activities and mapped in more detail which sexual practices adolescents undertake in which social media places and with whom. Moreover, the open-ended questions that were included proved to be an opportunity for young people to mention experiences and feelings which they considered to be taboo or hard to talk about in a face-to-face conversation.

The survey was completed by 679 Dutch young people aged 12–18. About half of the survey participants were pupils at a large school offering pre-vocational and academic secondary education in a small town in the East of the Netherlands. The pupils varied with regard to age, gender and educational level. Unfortunately, with regard to ethnicity there was little diversity in this school, as almost all pupils described their ethnic background as Dutch. An effort was made to recruit additional schools for the survey which were more ethnically diverse, but it was not successful, both due to practical reasons (e.g. busy school schedules and approaching summer holidays) and to the topic of the survey (see also Leurs 2012). In addition, diversity in terms of sexual preferences, practices and identifications was not very extensive, with heterosexuality being dominant. This was corrected by recruiting the other half of the survey participants via an online community for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender youth. Thus, the survey reports about a wealth of experiences, but the quantitative analyses are not representative and should be regarded as indicative. Merging qualitative and quantitative information enabled a more complete understanding of young people’s online sexual practices (Creswell 2008). In this paper, all research participants have been anonymised.

## ‘Risky’ versus ‘safe’ practices: a false dichotomy

The labelling of certain online sexual practices of youth as risky and others as safe contributes to an oversimplified understanding of these practices (see also Hasinoff 2015; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015). In line with this dichotomous image, certain activities are marked as ‘safe’,

such as online contact with familiar people. Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter (2010) even excluded communication with familiar people from their study about online risks, defending this choice by quoting earlier research that linked communication with strangers to negative consequences such as unwanted sexual solicitations. Unfortunately, the most distressing sexual experiences that participants in this study told about often involved people whom they knew quite well offline, such as (ex-)partners, friends and family members (see also Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011, 130). Indeed, the fact that sexual violence is committed by non-strangers in about 80–90% of all cases is something that has already been proven extensively in relation to offline sexual violence (Bicanic 2012; de Haas 2012; National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children 2014), and the present study indicates that also online, talking with familiar people may not be that 'safe'.

The dichotomy of dangerous versus safe has also received critique from HIV researchers (Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016; Logie and Gibson 2013; Peart, Rosenthal, and Moore 1996). Historically, HIV has been associated with specific categories of people (most notably gay men), while other categories of people and sexual activities have been constructed as safe. The construction of dangerous versus safe sex not only stigmatises certain people and activities, but also obscures risks that come with so-called safe sexual practices. A similar argument has been made by researchers studying sadomasochism (S/M) practices (Gregori 2013; Khan 2014; Newmahr 2011). Taking the argument one step further, we might even conclude that there is no such thing as safe sex: each sexual activity brings certain risks, even though the nature of these may differ (see also Khan 2014, 259).

Still, risks are often seen as a reason to advise youth, especially girls, not to undertake (certain) online sexual activities. The consequences of such advice are problematic. First, it limits young people's sexual freedom (see also Aggleton and Campbell 2000; boyd 2008; Burns 2015; Karaian 2012, 2015; Renold, Ringrose, and Egan 2015; Ringrose et al. 2013; Robinson 2013; Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013). Second, if young people ignore the advice and fall victim to unpleasant or disturbing experiences, they are easily blamed for it. For example, if a sexual picture is shared widely against the will of the sender, this is often interpreted as being the victim's own fault because 'the picture should not have been sent in the first place' (see also Bailey and Steeves 2015; Eikren and Ingram-Waters 2016; Hasinoff 2015). Victim blaming can be a serious threat to victims' self-esteem and well-being, and keep them from seeking help. Fears and shame among victims are further reinforced by the hyperbolic language that is often used in relation to risks ('it will be on the Internet forever'; 'everybody will see it'), which are powerful and dangerous exaggerations. In order to overcome the limitations, problems and dangers of contemporary discourse about 'risky sexual behaviour', we need to 'queer' our understandings of these practices (Karaian and Van Meyl 2015). In this paper, I aim to contribute to such a queering by proposing a new approach that is based on new concepts.

### **Reframing the debate: the adventure approach**

To do this, I propose to reconceptualise young people's online sexual activities as adventures: experiences that involve uncertainty of outcome (Hopkins and Putnam 1993, 6), and therefore bring risk – the potential of losing something of value, leading to harm that may be physical, mental, social or financial (Priest and Gass 2005, 18). Potential harms include those

that have been identified as relevant in dominant discourse and which were discussed in the introduction to this paper, such as bullying and sexual violence. They also include other harms, however, that are often overlooked even though they are important to young people. I will elaborate on this later.

The adventure approach that I want to propose is inspired by several academic fields that have critically reflected upon the meanings of risk. One of these is the sociology of risk-taking, a field that has been highly influenced by sociologist Ulrich Beck ([1986] 1992) and the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1985) and Douglas and Wildavsky (1982). In contrast to psychological, individualised accounts of risk, both Beck and Douglas emphasised the ways in which social and cultural contexts influence our beliefs about risk (Wilkinson 2001, 5).

Their work has been taken up and developed in different directions. Of particular interest are social-cultural studies of 'edgework' (Lyng 1990), or voluntary participation in activities that involve 'a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence' (1990, 857), such as extreme sports.<sup>3</sup> These activities confront practitioners with edges, or 'boundaries': life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity and order versus chaos, which endow the activities with a particular emotional intensity. Even though fear plays an important role, edgework always involves the confidence that one can overcome risks by using one's skills, in particular the skill to stay 'in control' (Lyng 1990; Lyng and Matthews 2007).

According to Hart (2017), young people's practice of sharing sexy (i.e. 'risky') selfies on Tumblr can be considered edgework: research participants negotiated boundaries of morality/immorality and order/disorder; prepared and deployed specific skills; and maintained a perception of control. This cannot simply be extended to all young people's risky online sexual practices however, as not all risks are perceived by young people as 'clearly observable threats' that can or should be overcome through skills, and young people who engage in risky online sexual practices do not necessarily claim or value the ideal of being in control.

I therefore propose to use the concept of adventure rather than edgework to make sense of young people's online sexual practices. This is inspired by a research field that may be referred to as 'adventure studies', which includes highly interrelated studies in adventure therapy (e.g. Frandzel 1997; Norton et al. 2014; Russell and Gillis 2017), adventure travel (e.g. Black and Bricker 2015; Sung, Morrison, and O'Leary 1996; Taylor, Varley, and Johnston 2013) and adventure education (e.g. Hopkins and Putnam 1993; Nichols 2000; Priest and Gass 2005). What these studies have in common is their attention to the ways in which the fears and challenges related to risk may contribute to therapeutic, developmental and educational goals, although a growing body of literature challenges the central and unproblematic role that is sometimes attributed to risk (Brown and Fraser 2009). The concept of adventure has in common with the concept of edgework that it acknowledges the positive potential of risk, but it does not limit the focus to activities that involve a feeling of control, and can therefore be used to discuss a broader range of practices. In the following sections, I will explore how the concept of adventure can help in developing a new framework for analysing young people's online sexual practices.

This framework, which I call the adventure approach, is characterised by three key elements. First, it enables us to distinguish between risks and outcomes of an activity, showing that risks do not necessarily lead to unpleasant outcomes. Second, it conceptualises risk as a potentially constructive, rather than a necessarily destructive force. Third, it enables us to recognise the subjective and dynamic nature of risks.

### ***Distinguishing risks and outcomes***

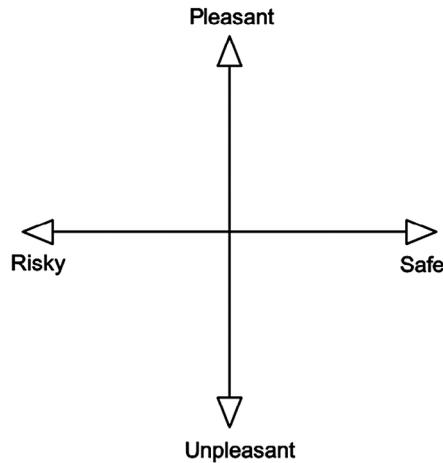
The first element of the adventure approach concerns the relationship between risks and outcomes of a practice. In dominant discourse about risky sexual behaviour, young people's online sexual activities are reduced to their 'risky' aspects, and connected to all kinds of unpleasant outcomes. This continuous emphasis on correlations between risks and unpleasant outcomes has led to a presupposition that risky activities will necessarily and only lead to unpleasant outcomes, suggesting a continuum with on the one end risk and unpleasant outcomes, and on the other end safety and pleasant outcomes.

Earlier, I argued that completely safe sexual activities may not even exist, that there is a risk in every sexual activity. This is not a negative or pessimistic finding: adventure studies, risk studies and feminist studies have all indicated that risky activities can very well result in pleasant outcomes. For example, when adventure therapist and academic researcher Lee Gillis (in Frandzel 1997) discusses the activity of crossing a rope bridge, he mentions the potential negative outcome of getting injured, but also the potential positive outcomes of getting a rush and increasing self-confidence. In analysing the attraction of edgework, Lyng describes the potential outcome of 'self-realisation' (1990, 860). Connecting this to sexuality and social media, Hart (2017, 309–310) demonstrates that sharing naked selfies on Tumblr may result in feelings of exhilaration and empowerment, showing that supposedly risky practices may very well have pleasant outcomes (see also Karaian and Van Meyl 2015; Lupton 1999; Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011; Tulloch and Lupton 2003).

This also became apparent in my analysis of the online sexual practices of research participants such as the exchange of sexy pictures or videos, having sexual conversations and watching sexually explicit material. Research participants often referred to pleasant outcomes of such activities killing time and overcoming boredom, bonding with friends, receiving compliments, meeting and flirting with potential partners, experiencing intimacy, sexual arousal and gratification, learning about sex and finding help in case of problems (see also Naezer *forthcoming-a*; Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen 2017).

When survey respondents were asked to evaluate their latest experience with sending somebody a sexual picture/video of themselves ( $n = 138$ ), 10% evaluated this experience as '(very) unpleasant', while 43% considered it a 'normal/neutral' experience and 46% evaluated it as '(a lot of) fun'. About doing something sexual in front of a webcam ( $n = 77$ ), 18% said they found their latest experience '(very) unpleasant', while 35% evaluated it as 'normal/neutral' and 47% indicated it had been '(a lot of) fun'. When asked about their opinion on online pornographic materials (multiple answers allowed,  $n = 390$ ), 19% chose 'unpleasant' as one of their answers. Larger percentages however chose more positive answers such as 'exciting/arousing' (58%) and 'funny' (25%). A comparable percentage chose 'good to know what porn is about' (17%), and a smaller percentage chose 'informative' (13%), 'fun to talk about with friends' (9%), 'fun to watch together with friends' (5%) or 'other' (e.g. 'not interesting', 'don't know', 'don't care'; 10%). Even though it is important to recognise the unpleasant and sometimes even disturbing experiences that are mentioned, my research shows that an exclusive focus on unpleasant outcomes leaves a large part of young people's experiences untouched. Risks, or risky activities, more often than not lead to pleasant outcomes. Moreover, experiences that were labelled as unpleasant were not necessarily experienced as disturbing or traumatic.

In other words, pleasure and danger actually seem to be the ends of *two* different continua: (1) risky versus safe and (2) pleasant versus unpleasant. Sexual activities take place on specific intersections of these two axes, as is visualised in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The adventure approach: distinguishing risks and outcomes.

Risk and pleasure may intersect in different ways: an activity may feel relatively safe and pleasant, but also relatively safe and unpleasant (for example because it feels 'boring'). Similarly, an activity can feel relatively risky and unpleasant, but also relatively risky and pleasant ('exciting'). For example, the risky activity of talking online with a stranger about sex may be experienced as unpleasant if the stranger behaves in a threatening way, but it may also be experienced as pleasant if the stranger provides useful information, or if the young person can have a laugh at the other.

Moreover, the notion of outcome is more complex than is often assumed. Rather than having only one outcome, activities usually have multiple outcomes. To return to the example of the rope bridge in adventure therapy, crossing it may result in both bruises and increased self-esteem. Also, sexual activities can have multiple outcomes. For example, posting a sexy picture on Facebook may result in the pleasant outcome of receiving compliments, but also in the unpleasant outcome of being stigmatised as a slut. Risky sexual activities, or rather sexual adventures, may thus result in one or more unpleasant outcomes, but also in one or more pleasant outcomes.

### ***The constructive potential of risk***

The second characteristic of the adventure approach concerns the evaluation of risk.

In dominant discourse about risky sexual behaviour, risk is often interpreted as a negative force. This one-dimensional conceptualisation of sexual risk contrasts sharply with the conceptualisation of risk in adventure studies, risk studies and feminist studies. Researchers in these fields noticed how the defeat of a risk may contribute to a feeling of accomplishment. Professor of psychology and adventure therapist Dene Berman discussed his kayaking trips with the adolescent victims of abuse or neglect (in Frandzel 1997, 79), and argued:

Learning to kayak and run rapids where waves were crashing over their heads was very empowering. These were kids who never thought they would be able to do something that would involve so much personal control. They felt like conquering heroes.

Berman thus evaluates risk not as a negative force, but as a constructive factor contributing to young people's empowerment.

Taking the argument one step further, it is not just overcoming a (perceived) risk that is seen as a positive experience; also, the risk itself can be experienced as positive and pleasant. As Lyng (1990) describes in his paper on edgework, risks caused sensations in his research participants such as exhilaration, feelings of omnipotence, an altered sense of perception and consciousness and a 'hyperreality'. Similarly, Deane and Harré (2014, 298) explain in their paper on adventure education how risk and unpredictability can create 'an internal tension or disequilibrium', which may encourage participants to notice things they do not normally perceive. The pleasure of an experience can thus be precisely in the risks that come with it.

This more positive conceptualisation of risk has also been advocated by several feminist sexuality researchers (e.g. Dean 2008; Franke 2001; Gregori 2013; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015; Khan 2014; Newmahr 2011), building on the classical work about sexual pleasure produced by theorists on the sex-positive or pro-sex side of the feminist 'sex-wars' (e.g. Fine 1988; Vance 1984). Franke (2001) for example argues that feminist legal theorists have done 'a meager job' in thinking about sexuality in positive terms. The focus on the elimination of danger has left for women 'a sanitised, meager simulacrum of sex' that is not even worth the fight, she says (2001, 207). Instead, Franke argues, it is actually the proximity to danger that 'creates the heat' (2001, 207): danger is not contradictory to, but in a close relation with pleasure. In a similar fashion, Gregori (2013) objects to the negative conceptualisation of danger, for example in certain discourses about S/M in which violence is downplayed. This neutralisation of violence is useful for establishing a politically correct story about S/M, but can also lead to an (over)simplified image of the practice, says Gregori (see also Khan 2014; Newmahr 2011). Also Dean (2008) has objected to a negative interpretation of risk. He analyses how in the context of barebacking, taking the risk of HIV-infection may be regarded as a certain proof of masculinity. Thus, the pleasure of feeling like a 'real man' resides within the risk of HIV-transmission. As Dean shows, another group of barebacking men actually desire being infected. For these men, being infected is invested with notions of community and kinship, making (potential) infection a pleasure rather than a risk. Discussing young people's sexting practices, Karaian and Van Meyl argue that 'the pleasure of the practice may to some degree flow from knowing that the boundaries of their consent may be exceeded' (2015, 30). Together these studies show how a risk may actually be a positive force that enhances pleasure.

This potentially positive feeling of taking a risk also came to the fore in conversations with participants in this study. For example, in stories about chat sites such as Chatlokaal and Chatroulette,<sup>4</sup> (the expectation of) seeing naked men played a double role. During a focus group discussion with girls, seeing those men was presented as a risk on the one hand: '[On Chatroulette] you meet nice people with whom you can have a laugh and stuff. But sometimes it gets spoilt because you meet those dirty men' (Zara, 13). On the other hand, it was exactly those 'dirty men' (men showing naked body parts, masturbating, asking sexual questions and making sexual requests) that caused enormous hilarity among the participants. They described their encounters with these 'dirty men' with obvious joy and excitement, and they laughed about each other's stories about how they reacted. Here, the risk of seeing and interacting with naked adult men, not knowing exactly what they will do, is actually part of the pleasure, and of the excitement, that is involved in this activity. This shows that risk does not per se limit pleasure, in fact it may be (part of) the pleasure.

## ***Subjectivity and dynamics***

Dominant discourses about risky sexual behaviour are based on an idea of closure on the question what constitutes a risk. Certain activities, such as sexual contact with strangers or sharing intimate information online, are generally presented as obviously, objectively and rigidly risky. Adventure theorists, risk theorists and feminist theorists have pointed out however, that risk is actually much more subjective and dynamic. The level of risk that is involved in an activity, and especially whether this level of risk is 'acceptable', is always based on a (more or less thorough) personal judgement of the situation, which is interwoven with historically and culturally specific social norms and a person's positionality in society.

For example, connecting the fields of psychology and adventure education, Berman and Davis-Berman (2005) argue that anxiety and risk perception are very subjective experiences, and what for one person may feel like an everyday experience may be a big leap out of the 'comfort zone' for others. Moreover, socio-cultural studies about risk have shown that people's notions of and responses to risk cannot be isolated from their context: what counts as risk in one context may be ignored or even labelled safe in another context (Karaian and Van Meyl 2015; Lupton 2006). This context includes social relations around, for instance, gender, age and sexual identity (Brown and Fraser 2009; Laurendeau 2008; Tulloch and Lupton 2003).

Feminist sociologists Giritli Nygren, Monterius, Ohman and Olofsson argue in different papers that even though (health) risks are made to appear as objective measurements of danger, they are in fact social constructs (Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016; Giritli Nygren and Olofsson 2014; Montelius and Giritli Nygren 2014). Inspired by Butler's theory of performativity, they propose to analyse risk as 'doing': as an everyday lived experience that is actively (re)produced at various levels and in diverse contexts, and that is intertwined with social norms and hierarchies of power (Giritli Nygren and Olofsson 2014, 1122). For example, by focusing on sexually transmitted diseases among gay men, health research and practices have contributed to a construction of these diseases as a gay risk, while at the same time failing to acknowledge heteronormativity and homophobia as a source of risk (Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016). Such a framework of doing risk draws attention to (calculations of) risk as lived experience (Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016, 46).

Indeed, also in this study, the calculation of risk was done differently by different participants. For example, when I discussed my research with adults (e.g. parents, teachers, health professionals, police officers, judicial officers), they often found it 'stupid' for young people to engage in online sexual activities such as sharing sexy pictures. Adults evaluated this as an extremely dangerous activity because of the risks that were involved, such as the risk of a picture being spread among a broader audience. Young people who engaged in these practices often had a different opinion. For example, Richard (16) said about his experience with sending sexy pictures to his boyfriend: 'I know I can trust him [not to spread the pictures], otherwise he wouldn't have been my boyfriend.' Richard obviously evaluates the danger of this activity differently than the aforementioned adults, demonstrating the subjective nature of risk.

Such differences in the evaluation of risk are embedded in social structures. Richard for instance is privileged in terms of gender, as he does not face the risk of slut-shaming that is so central to girls' experiences with sharing sexy pictures (see also Albury 2015; Dobson 2015; Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; Lamb et al. 2016; Naezer *forthcoming-b*; Payne 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Richards 2017; Ringrose 2011; Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011;

Ringrose and Harvey 2015; Ringrose et al. 2013). At the same time, sending a sexy picture in the context of a same-sex relationship increases the risk for Richard to be confronted with homophobic bullying if the picture is spread. So, while evaluations of risk are subjective, they are not individual. Instead, they are deeply social and embedded in power structures.

Also, the question of which risks matter (most) was answered differently by different actors. While for some young people the most urgent risk is indeed the risk of seeing a naked man or the risk of a sexy picture being spread without permission, for other youth there are different risks that are more relevant. These may for example be the risk of being 'caught' by an adult while watching (certain) sexual content online, or the risk of being rejected by a (potential) lover. Several research participants also pointed at the risk of other people finding out about one's sexual desires or activities, potentially leading to stigmas such as 'slut' or 'gay' and, as a consequence, social exclusion and/or other forms of violence (see also Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016; Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011, 133–134). These risks carry similar negative outcomes as those described by Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter (2010): feelings of shame, guilt and embarrassment, but are still often neglected in risk discourse. Which risks matter (most) should therefore not be assumed a priori, but instead be investigated as a subjective question that deserves thorough attention.

Next to being subjective, an activity's level of risk can also be rather dynamic, and depends on choices that are made with regard to who is involved in the activity, which medium is used, what type of material that is looked up or exchanged, how much and what kind of information is exchanged and which 'safety measures' are taken. For example, the decision to give an anonymous conversation partner your phone number during an online chat may help to find out more about that person, while also increasing the risk of being harassed by that person offline. The level of perceived risk may change with every choice that is made during an activity by each of the participants. The same argument can be made about the level of pleasure that is experienced: this too is a subjective and dynamic characteristic.

Looking at Figure 1 once again, the subjective and dynamic character of risk and pleasure means that the exact position of a specific activity on both axes is multiple, subjective and dynamic, and each sexual activity may be located at different intersections in different contexts, at different times and by different persons evaluating the activity. Therefore, in discussing young people's sexual experiences in social media, both the level of pleasure and the level of risk as well as the ways in which these intersect should be investigated rather than assumed a priori.

## Conclusion

Feminist scholarship has performed an important intervention in public and academic debates about youth, sexuality and social media, with researchers pointing out that panics about potential harm mainly function to moralise about, pathologise and police particular behaviours and children. Instead of approaching young people as passive victims who are 'exposed' to sexual risks, these researchers reconceptualised youth as agents who actively negotiate the chances and challenges offered by social media. This paper contributes to this queer project by suggesting that not only youth should be reconceptualised, but also their online sexual practices. Mobilising an interdisciplinary interaction between critical

socio-cultural studies of risk, feminist theory and adventure studies, I proposed to reconceptualise young people's online sexual activities as adventures: activities with uncertain outcomes that may lead to negative outcomes, but also to positive outcomes, or to both positive *and* negative outcomes.

Approaching online sexual practices as adventures rather than risky behaviour first of all means that risks and outcomes are clearly distinguished, so that these practices can be analysed as taking place on an intersection of two continuums: that of pleasant versus unpleasant, and that of risky versus safe. Moreover, risk is not seen as a negative force that can and should be eliminated, but as a potentially constructive force that can work out in different ways. Finally, the specific position of an activity on the pleasure as well as the risk continuum is highly subjective and dynamic. This means that it is impossible to establish static definitions of pleasure and risk in young people's online sexual experiences. Rather, these concepts as well as their specific intersections should be the object of constant analysis and discussion, in which not only adult, but also young people's voices must be heard. Thus, an adventure approach enables a discussion that accounts for the complexities, multiplicities and contradictions involved in young people's online sexual practices, while avoiding unwarranted conclusions about these practices and the young people involved in them.

## Notes

1. Three focus group meetings were conducted by the author together with a number of Masters students, who used the data as part of their postgraduate theses. Two of these meetings were chaired by MA students: the first by Queeny Eugenia and the second by Marjoke Tiems. In these meetings, the author was present only as an observer. A third meeting was chaired by the author, together with two other Masters students – Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée. All the other focus group meetings were conducted and chaired by the author.
2. The survey was conducted by the author with the help of two Masters students, Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée.
3. The feminist sociologists Newmahr (2011) and Shay (2015) later expanded Lyng's rather masculinist account of edgework to include non-physical (emotional, psychological) forms of risk-taking.
4. Chatlokaal and Chatroulette are chat sites (the first is Dutch, the second international). Users, who can remain completely anonymous if they wish, are randomly connected to other users and can decide at any moment to stop the conversation. Sites like these have a reputation of attracting adult men who are looking for sexual contact with teenage girls. At least for Chatroulette, this reputation was confirmed by the students I supervised.

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