Sexy adventures

An ethnography of youth, sexuality and social media

Marijke Naezer

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Chapter 1

Exploring youth, sexuality and social media

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1.1 Introduction

When it comes to youth, sexuality and social media, public imagination has been highly influenced by media reports about the dangers of young people's digitally mediated sexual practices. Cases of sexual violence have received major media attention, and journalists have speculated about negative outcomes of social media use such as the 'corruption' of childhood innocence, romantic love, sexual health and social cohesion. One journalist argued for instance in a large Dutch newspaper (Kuitenbrouwer 2008):

> The Internet has made sex into a depersonalised commodity. Porn contaminates sex. [...] Sex as part of love has become old fashioned. [...] Parents should install protecting software on their computers [...] and discuss the danger of consumer-sex with their children.

Worries about the negative impact of social media on youth sexuality are reflected in and reinforced by psychological, bio-medical academic research about the topic, which has mainly focused on correlations between media use and problems such as sexual violence (e.g. Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter 2010; Jones, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2012), sexual dysfunction and sex-addiction (e.g. Cooper 2000; Peter and Valkenburg 2008; Delmonico and Griffin 2012), and psychological problems such as narcissism (e.g. Korff-Sausse 2016; McCain et al. 2016).

As a consequence of this negative conceptualisation of digitally mediated sexual practices, young people's activities are being condemned, policed and pathologised (Renold, Egan, and Ringrose 2015), also in the Netherlands, a country that is generally known for its liberal and positive attitude towards young people and sexuality (Lewis and Knijn 2002; Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005; Schalet 2011; Krebbekx 2018). This social upheaval is not unique: concerns about youth sexuality are of all times, and generally reach a peak when new, potentially dangerous sexual practices are signalled (Duits 2008; Oorschot 2011). Similarly, the introduction of new media technologies typically evokes public concerns, which sometimes become so intense and emotionally charged that they may be labelled 'media panics' (Drotner 1999). Now that social media are providing young people with

new ways of exploring sexuality, these environments are considered as a threat rather than an opportunity, and young people are discouraged from participating in these environments and criticised or even punished if they decide otherwise.

The conceptualisation of social media as mainly 'dangerous' and 'bad' seems to contradict the popularity of social media among young people. For instance, a large scale quantitative study of Dutch young people's sexual practices (Graaf et al. 2017) revealed that one in three young people aged 12-25 had used a dating app in the previous six months, and one in eight had sent someone a nude picture or sexual video of themselves. Moreover, the Internet and social media were used for activities such as finding information about sexuality, watching porn, and communicating with romantic partners. In some cases, online interaction was even considered as 'easier' than offline interaction. For instance, 44% of all participants found it easier to let somebody know they fancy them in an online chat than offline (Graaf et al. 2017, 169).

Young people's enthusiastic use of social media for a variety of sexual practices thus seems to indicate that other, more positive dimensions than just risk and danger might play a role. In my research project, I explored this idea, and investigated how young people enact sexuality in their social media practices. In this introductory chapter, I will first introduce the research questions and aims that guided this project. After that, I will define and discuss the main concepts: sexuality, young people and social media. Subsequently, the research methodology will be discussed, and the final section will provide an outline of the thesis.

1.2 Research questions and aims

The main research question of this thesis is:

How do young people enact sexuality in their social media practices?

This question is divided into three sub questions, based on the key concepts in the research question. The first sub question is aimed at investigating sexuality as a performative category that is socially constructed: *Which main dimensions of sexuality can be distinguished in young people's digitally mediated practices?*

The second question is aimed at deconstructing the category of young people: *How is the enactment of sexuality related to the performance of multiple, interfering axes of social difference?*

The third sub question is aimed at investigating the role of social media: *How do young people perceive and construct social media in terms of their perceived affordances and qualities, and how do these constructions interact with the construction of sexuality?*

With this study, I aim to contribute to a small but growing body of literature that seeks to move beyond what I would call 'social media panics', by empirically studying digitally mediated sexual practices from the perspective of young people themselves. This is important, because anxieties about young people's digitally mediated sexual practices have resulted in the condemnation, policing and pathologising of these practices. Making visible why young people are so invested in social media can contribute to overcoming panic and abstinence-only advices, so that we can respond to young people's digitally mediated adventures in a more sex-positive way and thus enhance young people's sexual freedom and pleasure.

As will be explained in more detail in the next chapter, this focus on young people's perspectives positions my project in a highly interdisciplinary field of critical research about youth, sexuality and social media, which takes place at the intersections of media studies, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, gender studies and queer studies. In this field of critical research, two main approaches may be distinguished: one that approaches the topic from a gender perspective (e.g. Ridder and Bauwel 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013; Albury 2015; Warfield 2016; Renold and Ringrose 2017), and one that approaches it from a queer perspective[1] (e.g. Hillier and Harrison 2007; Szulc and Dhoest 2013; Pullen 2014; Cho 2015; Albury and Byron 2016; Maliepaard 2017). While research about youth, sexuality and social media conducted from a gender perspective has mainly focused on the construction of gendered sexual identities, research from a queer perspective also included other dimensions of sexuality, such as sexual knowledge building. With my project, I build on these strands of research and aim to extend them, by identifying which main dimensions of sexuality can be distinguished in young people's social media practices and how these dimensions are constructed and given meaning in different contexts.

While aiming to have young people's voices heard, I am also cautious not to romanticise young people or uncritically accept their ideas and practices. Instead, detaching myself from the field at the same time as I became involved helped to remain critical (Meijl 2005), which is a key element of taking young people seriously (see also Duits 2008, 29). Moreover, I do not consider research to be the 'discovery' of knowledge by a disembodied

[1] In this thesis, I use 'research from a queer perspective' in a broad sense, including LGBT research.

researcher performing the 'god-trick' of 'seeing everything from nowhere' (Haraway 1991, 189). Instead, knowledge is created in the interaction between the researcher and 'the field' (Charmaz and Bryant 2008), and it is the researcher who has the power to 'name and frame' the realities of research participants (Chambers 2012). This thesis thus represents my naming and framing of young people's voices.

1.3 Main concepts

Sexuality

Sexuality is a complex, multifaceted and multilayered notion that includes personalised sexual feelings and desires, social ideologies and practices of kinship, gender relations and reproduction, power relations, symbolic meanings of gender, and moral discourses (Spronk 2012, 7). Being aware of these various meanings and uses of the concept, I did not choose beforehand which sexual feelings, relations, symbols, discourses, desires and practices were to be in- or excluded in my research project. Instead, I set out to investigate which elements played a role in young people's daily practices, and how these contributed to the enactment of multiple dimensions of sexuality. This is based on an understanding of sexuality as a category that is 'performed' (Butler 1988, 1990) or 'enacted' (Mol 2002; Law 2004) through our daily practices, be those speech, gestures, dress, or other online and offline acts.

Building on the tradition of 'critical sexualities studies' (Plummer 2012), I regard the performance or enactment of sexuality as a deeply social project, in contrast to biomedical and psychological understandings of sexuality as located within the individual, to be measured through individual scores on bodies, emotions, behaviours, attitudes and knowledge; an approach that has been dominant in the study of sexuality since the publication of the famous Kinsey-reports (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948, 1953) after World War II (Krebbekx 2018, 10-3). Such an individualised approach to sexuality has been challenged by critical research into the 'discursive production' (Foucault 1978 [1976]) and 'social scripting' (Simon and Gagnon 1984, 53-4) of sexuality, demonstrating that rather than being an individual 'possession' or 'urge', sexuality is socially produced in the interplay between bodies, pleasures, discourses, knowledges, control and resistance (Foucault 1978 [1976], 105-6), and is thus part of broader social, cultural, economic and political structures (Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2003; Weeks 2005; Weeks 2017). The present research is situated within this social constructionist tradition, in the sense

that sexuality is conceptualised as a *social* phenomenon rather than a collection of individual behaviours.

Critical studies of sexuality pointed out how in this process of making sexuality, categories of difference are constructed, often in binary oppositions such as homosexual versus heterosexual, and female versus male sexuality (Eerdewijk 2007). Critical scholars have argued that such categorisations are not neutral. Instead, they work to divide the 'normal/acceptable' from the 'abnormal/unacceptable' (Hall 2003 [1997], 258). Everything that does not fit the normal is excluded as deviant, pathological, outsider, Other, and sent into 'symbolic exile', with social and material consequences (Crenshaw 1991). For example, Butler pointed out that performances of gender and sexuality are structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality (1990, 145), while Rubin (1984, 151) uses the notion of the 'erotic pyramid' to describe how social categorisation has resulted in a hierarchical system of sexual value in Western societies, with marital, reproductive heterosexuals at the top.

As Fischer (2006, 60) rightfully states, Rubin's pyramid intersects with other power relations and categorisations. For example, sexual stereotypes are used to distinguish different ethnic groups, and to present dominant groups as 'better' than minority groups (Nagel 2003; Krebbekx, Spronk, and M'charek 2016). In the Netherlands, the assumed acceptance of sexual diversity is portrayed for instance as being threatened by 'immigrants' or 'allochtonen'.[2] Worries about 'deviant' sexual practices such as 'breezersex' (sex in exchange for drinks) and loverboys are being associated with non-western immigrants, which reflects and reinforces the denial of the 'white' history of prostitution in the Netherlands (Duits & Zoonen, 2008:22-23; Krebbekx, 2009:7). Critical analyses such as those discussed in this section demonstrate the importance of investigating the relations between sexuality, categorisations and power relations.

Young people

The main research population of this study consists of 'young people' aged 12 to 18, which is the period where young people attend secondary education in the Netherlands, as well as the period that is generally constructed as the period in which people become sexually 'active' (Graaf et al. 2012). In general, Western cultures understand this period of 'adolescence' as a

[2] 'Allochtonen' is a controversial Dutch term to denote 'those who are from elsewhere', as in opposition to 'autochtonen', meaning 'those who are from here'. It carries strong connotations of (not) belonging (Wekker and Lutz 2001; Mepschen 2016).

biological and social 'transition' from childhood to adulthood. In academic and popular discourses about this transition, bio-medical notions of 'raging hormones' (e.g. Kohnstamm 2009) and the 'puberal brain' (e.g. Crone 2008, 2012) have become powerful actors, which has resulted in a construction of young people as immature, risk prone, impulsive and irrational; a construction that implies adults as mature, risk-averse, reasonable and rational. These constructions of young people have been criticised for advancing essentialism and biological determinism, reducing young people to little more than a 'brain in a jar' (Kelly 2012), and for imagining children and young people in a 'forward-looking way' that revolves around what they will *become* rather than who they *are* (Ito et al. 2010, 6; Kelly 2011).

In this research project, another paradigm of childhood is followed (Duits 2008; Ito et al. 2010; Jansen and Driessen 2016): one that considers children and young people as active agents in their own right.[3] This paradigm locates young people as 'embodied, sentient beings who confront the ongoing, never-ending challenge of living a life' (Kelly 2012, 957). Moreover, the category of 'young people' is understood as a social construct, much like categories related to sexuality and gender (see also Laz 1998; Duits 2008; Sniekers 2017). As Laz (1998) argues, age involves much more than just the number of years since one's birth, and should be understood as the accomplishment of people's ongoing work of 'acting their age'. Based on such an understanding of age, the present study investigates how constructs such as 'youth' are performed and given meaning in research participants' daily practices.

Age as an axis of social difference 'interferes' (Moser 2006) with other social axes such as gender, educational level, ethnicity, sexual preferences, and religion. In previous research about youth sexuality, these categories have often been used to divide young people into different (often dichotomous) groups, and to analyse differences between the groups, for example between boys and girls, homosexuals and heterosexuals, and ethnic majorities and minorities (e.g. Graaf et al. 2012). Such a priori categorisations of young people are problematic. First, they reproduce certain categories as 'important', whereas in daily life, these may actually not be that relevant to the young people involved.

Second, these categorisations homogenise people and experiences, which often results in harmful stereotypes (Rommes, Sørensen, and Faulkner 2011). As intersectional thinkers have shown however, different axes of

[3] This is also the reason why I use the words 'youth' and 'young people' more often than 'adolescents'. The concept of 'adolescent' is used especially in psychological and pedagogical paradigms in which children and youth are constructed as 'becoming', rather than 'being'.

identity acquire meaning in relation to each other, and form interdependent systems of ideas and practices (Crenshaw 1993; Wekker and Lutz 2001, 24). For example, within the women's movement, women of colour pointed out how the dominant paradigm was formulated from a white perspective, and neglected their experiences as *black* women. An intersectional approach acknowledges the complex workings of identity, and reminds us that differences within 'groups' may be larger than differences between 'groups', making a comparison between 'groups' rather problematic.

Third, categorisation can easily work to suggest causal relationships between specific groups and certain behaviours, even if such a causal relationship does not exist. For example, as Krebbekx and colleagues (2013, 2016) demonstrate, research about sexuality in the Netherlands links 'problematic' behaviour to specific ethnic groups. Findings that are not consistent with that paradigm are neglected or re-framed, so that the categories can remain intact, and ideas about the relation between these categories and certain behaviours remain unquestioned.

Fourth, comparisons between groups are often very normative: the behaviour of one specific group is (implicitly) described as the norm, against which other behaviours are measured (Krebbekx, Spronk, and M'charek 2013, 2016). Here too, intersectional thinking reminds us that all individuals (also members of the dominant groups) live on intersections, and no position is 'normal' or 'natural', or constructed outside of power relations (Wekker and Lutz 2001, 25). This means that dominant groups and their norms should also be subject to critical analysis. These fundamental objections against *a priori* categorisation show that rather than comparing certain 'groups', it is more interesting to analyse how these groups are constructed in young people's daily sexual practices, and how this reproduces social hierarchies and inequalities. In my research project, I therefore analyse which differences and similarities are considered as meaningful by whom, in which contexts, and how they are produced.

Social media

Contemporary worries about 'kids these days', although not particularly new, differ from earlier versions in how strongly they equate generational identity with technology identity (Ito et al. 2010, 2). Children and young people are labelled as 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001), the 'net generation' (Tapscott 1999), or 'cyberkids' (Holloway and Valentine 2003), and their lives and identities are perceived as being defined through their use of computer and Internet technology. This rhetoric has been criticised for its reinforcement of simplistic binaries as well as its technological determinism (Buckingham

2006). Rather than causing a fundamental generational divide, Buckingham argues, 'the consequences of technology depend crucially on how we use technology, and what we use it for' (2006, 11). The present research therefore steers away from deterministic, binary narratives of a 'digital generation', and instead seeks for a more contextualised and nuanced understanding of social media's role in young people's sexual practices.

In general, it can be said that Internet use is common among Dutch young people: between 2012 and 2017, 93 to 97% of all young people aged 12-25 accessed the Internet (almost) daily (CBS 2017). Mobile internet devices were popular: in 2012, 84% of all Dutch young people used a mobile device, most often a phone, to access the Internet in the three months prior to the survey, which increased to 97% in 2017. Social media such as chat applications and social networks played an important role in young people's daily Internet routines: 95 to 98% used social media in 2012-2017 (CBS 2017).

Even though most people have a general idea about what constitutes social media, a more precise definition is not easy to provide. In some sense, Christian Fuchs (2014, 4) says, all computing systems could be considered social media, in the sense that they store and transmit human knowledge. However, that would mean embracing a very broad definition of 'social'. In more specific definitions, the 'social' aspect of social media refers not so much to social media's possibilities for storing information, but especially to the extent to which they allow for interactive communication, community formation and/or online collaboration (Fuchs 2014, 5-6). Such a definition enables us to distinguish between a website and a medium such as Facebook, which not only provides information, but also allows users to communicate with each other and form online communities.

When discussing the definition of social media with research participants, they usually referred to these more specific types of sociality; especially that of interactive communication. In addition, research participants also mentioned the possibility to create an online 'presence' (e.g. an online profile) as a defining characteristic of social media. Combining Fuch's definition with research participants' descriptions of social media, I define social media as websites and applications that afford at least an online presence and interactive communication between individual users, and possibly also community formation and/or online collaboration.

Social media is not an emic concept, and research participants hardly ever used it, because they associated it with adults and considered it to be 'formal' language. They preferred to name the specific website or application, or they referred to their phone, which indicates not only the importance of mobile Internet use, but also the necessity to acknowledge the diverse character of 'social media'. Indeed, a wide variety of social media exists, which

afford different types of online presence, communication, community and collaboration. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) distinguish collaborative projects, which enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content (e.g. Wikipedia);[4] blogs, which are personal websites that display texts written by the owner (e.g. WordPress); content communities, whose main objective is the sharing of media content such as text, photos or videos (e.g. YouTube, Flickr); social networking sites, which enable users to connect by creating personal profiles, inviting friends to have access to those profiles, and sending messages (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram); virtual game worlds or multiplayer online role-playing games, in which users appear in the form of personalised avatars to act out a game (e.g. World of Warcraft); and virtual social worlds, in which users also appear as avatars and interact in a three-dimensional virtual environment, but with less rules restricting the range of possible interactions than in virtual game worlds (e.g. Second Life, Habbo).

Kaplan and Haenlein exclude more 'private' instant messaging and chatting services such as WhatsApp,[5] MSN Messenger,[6] Chatroulette and Chatlokaal.[7] I did include these in my study however, because these media do afford building an online presence,[8] as well as interactive communication. Moreover, research participants often categorised them as social media, either explicitly or implicitly. What also misses in Kaplan and Haenlein's description are online forums: websites where users ('members') can post a question for other members to answer. Users make an online profile, which makes them

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4 Some of the examples are added by me, in cases were Kaplan and Haenlein did not mention any examples, where their examples were already 'outdated', or where a popular Dutch example was available but not mentioned.

5 A free instant messaging service for smartphones. Users can send each other texts, images, videos, and audio messages. This service was extremely popular during my research.

6 MSN Messenger was a Microsoft chat application where users with an account could send each other text messages. It was rebranded Windows Live Messenger in 2009, but users kept referring to the service with the old name MSN (in Dutch accompanied by the verb 'to MSN': MSN-en). In 2013, Windows Live Messenger was discontinued and users were encouraged to start using Skype. During my research, youth deprecated 'MSN' as an old-fashioned application used mostly by younger kids.

7 Chatroulette and Chatlokaal are chat programs that allow users to (video)chat one on one with other people. The programmes randomly 'decides' whom you are connected to. If you or the other person presses the 'next' button (called 'nexting'), the program connects you to another person.

8 For example, in the case of WhatsApp, a profile consists of a phone number, picture and 'status' (where youth type all kinds of information, such as favourite soccer team, best friend, or romantic partner). This profile is by default visible for every WhatsApp user that knows another user's phone number.

recognisable as individual forum members, but also allows them to remain anonymous.[9] Another set of applications that is becoming more and more popular is that of meeting/dating applications such as Tinder and Grindr. These slightly differ from the other media because they are aimed at finding a sexual/romantic partner, thus making love and sex more explicit than is the case for most other media. However, they are similar to chat applications and social networking sites in the sense that users are encouraged to make an online profile and exchange messages with each other.

The category of 'social media' is thus highly diverse, and different media allow for different types of communication. Therefore, this thesis will use a 'platform-sensitive' approach (Bucher and Helmond 2017) and analyse which medium is used in what way for which practices, what features of that medium young people consider to be important in what circumstances, and how young people's sexual practices and online spaces are co-constructed in daily life. A concept that is useful for such a platform-sensitive approach is that of 'affordances', or 'what material artifacts such as media technologies allow people to do' (Bucher and Helmond 2017). As is stated by Bucher and Helmond, what makes the concept popular in social media studies is that it captures the relationship between materiality and human agency: what is afforded by a specific platform depends not only on its material, technical features, but also on the meanings, feelings, imaginings and expectations that are attributed to these features by a medium's user. For instance, Bucher and Helmond describe different interpretations of Twitter's former 'favourite' button: while some users regarded this as a possibility for expressing agreement, others interpreted it as a tool for storing tweets into their online archive. Such differences demonstrate how a medium's affordances are never just technical or material, but rather come into being through the interaction between technology and user. In this thesis, the concept of affordances will be employed for analysing how different digital environments are perceived and constructed by young people, and how online spaces and sexuality are co-constructed in their digitally mediated sexual practices.

Adopting a platform-specific approach is also useful for interrogating dominant understandings of social media. In present-day understandings of social media, several dichotomies play a role. In the introduction of this chapter, I already discussed how social media have been constructed as dangerous rather than safe, and bad rather than good. Two underlying dichotomies seem to play a role in this characterisation of social media. The first is that of online (also referred to as 'virtual' or 'digital') versus offline

[9] Sometimes, members do give additional information such as their name, the name of their school or place of residence, or a link to a personal website.

(also referred to as 'real'). This idea of social media being a separate world that is not 'real' has been reinforced through high profile academic work such as that of Sherry Turkle (1995; 2011). In an interview, Turkle even advices her audience to take some distance from their 'Twitter self' or 'Facebook self', because, as she argues, that's 'not really you'.[10]

A second influential dichotomy is that of public versus private, where social media are usually regarded as highly 'public'. This idea is reinforced by academic accounts such as boyd's theory of 'networked publics' (2008b, 125-6; 2014), in which she distinguishes four properties that she regards as fundamental to social media environments: persistence (communications are recorded 'for posterity'), searchability (search and discovery tools make it easy to find people and content), replicability/spreadability (content can be copied from one place to another), and scalability/visibility (the audience can potentially consist of all people across space and time). This emphasis on the public character of social media has resulted in worries about content being visible online 'forever', to be seen by 'everybody'.[11] Both dichotomies have been challenged over the last years, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Inspired by these discussions, this thesis will analyse how social media are constructed by young people in terms of qualities such as online/offline and public/private, and how these constructions interact with the construction of sexuality.

1.4 Methodology

A multiple and mixed methods design

In the following sections, I will elaborate on methodological aspects of my research project. First, I will discuss the reasons for choosing a specific methodology. After that, I will discuss in more detail the research methods that were used, and the ethical reflections that played a role. Then I will elaborate on how I analysed my research data.

Previous research on youth, sexuality and social media has been dominated by quantitative studies investigating correlations between certain activities and

[10] Simon Mainwaring interviews Sherry Turkle, author of Alone Together (Part 2), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMElY6pIA08. Accessed 19 March 2018.

[11] For example, a Dutch media campaign called 'Sexting=ineradicable' (in Dutch: *Sexting=onuitwisbaar*), an initiative of several Dutch welfare organizations, warned youth that 'the Internet knows no boundaries', online pictures and videos are 'public and accessible for everybody', and they may 'haunt you forever'. http://www.onuitwisbaar.nu/. Accessed 19 March 2018.

certain (negative) outcomes (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg 2008; Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter 2010; Jones, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2012; McCain et al. 2016). This has provided us with important data about young people's sexual practices as well as their social media use, but it revealed less about the meanings of these practices to young people themselves. Understanding such meanings is not easy, as they are not only complex, but also often taken for granted. This type of inquiry requires taking time to get to know people and their social context in depth (Geertz 1973).

The approach that best fits these requirements is ethnographic fieldwork, consisting of multiple methods, namely participation, observation, and conversation (Spradley 1980; Brewer 2003). As Hammersly and Atkinson (1995, 1) explain:

> In its most characteristic form [ethnographic fieldwork] involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions- in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.

Combining participation, observation and conversation also enables the researcher to gain insight not only into what people *say* they do, but also in what they actually *do*, which may be two very different things especially in relation to sexuality (Jansen 1997). Therefore, I chose to conduct multi-method ethnographic fieldwork. In the following section I will elaborate on that process and the different methods I used.

Next to being multi-method, this research is also mixed method: I used both qualitative and quantitative methods. John Creswell (2008) describes several reasons for choosing such a mixed methods design, most notably that it is useful for gaining a more complete understanding of a topic: qualitative and quantitative data are collected concurrently and merged into one interpretation, which consists of both quantitative information about magnitude and frequency and qualitative information about people and social contexts. Creswell calls this a 'triangulation or concurrent mixed methods design'. While mixed methods research often leans towards a more positivist methodological orientation that employs qualitative data mainly to illustrate or validate quantitative results, I employed a qualitative approach to mixed methods research that 'privileges the lived experiences of individuals' (Hesse-Biber 2010). The quantitative part of the research was used to add information about the commonality of specific practices that were explored during the qualitative part of the research. Moreover, the quantitative research yielded information about spaces and practices which are not used,

performed or talked about easily personally and/or in public, and therefore hard to study qualitatively. By merging the two sources of information into one interpretation, the understanding of young people's performance of sexuality in social media became more complete.

My research was further inspired by the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory is simultaneously a method of qualitative data collection and data analysis. The main characteristic is that these processes are interactive: data collection and data analysis are conducted in tandem and constantly inform each other (Charmaz and Bryant 2008). The aim of the analysis is to identify categories and concepts in text (in its broadest meaning) to connect these into substantive and formal theories. These theories are developed in a process of constant alternation between data-collection and data-analysis, until theoretical saturation is reached: the ideal point where researchers are comfortable that the properties and dimensions of the concepts and conceptual relationships are described as fully as possible and that as much complexity and variation as possible has been captured (Sandelowski 2008, 876).

In my research, I started out with rather broad observations and conversations, which became more focused during the first half year as I analysed my data and learnt more about possible themes. After seven months of fieldwork, I conducted a more thorough analysis and identified specific themes that needed more elaboration to come closer to the ideal of theoretical saturation. This resulted in several case studies in the second phase of data collection. After this phase, another period of analysis followed, which guided the development of the survey, which was conducted during the final phase of data collection.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasised inductive inquiry as an alternative to the dominant hypothetico-deductive approach in sociology in that time. They stated that categories should not be 'enforced' upon data, but instead should 'emerge' from the data. Even though Glaser and Strauss did mention the importance of theoretical sensitivity in this process, their use of terms such as 'emergence' and 'discovery' of categories, as well as their advice to abstain from reading literature about the topic under study, made the exact role of prior knowledge complicated and unclear (Kelle 2007). Later accounts of grounded theory tackled this issue, and emphasised that grounded theory is a construction that is made in the interaction between researcher and researched in a specific social and historical context. These accounts attended to 'the inescapable effect of prior knowledge and existing literature' (Charmaz and Bryant 2008).

Also in my research, the processes of data collection and data analysis were inescapably informed by earlier texts on youth, sexuality and/or social

media, although I used these critically and constantly reflected on the relationship between previous research and my data. Sometimes, this process of reflection was done together with research participants. For example, when a specific concept or theme which I knew from previous research did not come up automatically, such as 'social media' or 'sexting', I brought it up in a conversation and asked how participants felt about that concept. The categories that I eventually chose to use in my thesis are based on this reflection.

Qualitative research 1: Offline (participant) observation and focus group meetings

In most ethnographic Internet research, the research *site* is the starting point of the research. One medium is selected (e.g. Facebook, Tumblr) and the researcher analyses what happens within that space. I turned this around and studied a specific group of Internet *users*, namely a group of young people aged 12-18, analysing which social media they use for what kinds of practices. This enabled me to take young people's daily lives as a starting point, following their activities as they navigated through different online and offline spaces. Data collection took place between February 2013 and July 2014. An overview of the different methods that were used and the number of young people who were involved can be found in table 1 (page 39).

In the first year, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork using qualitative methods. The first phase of this ethnographic fieldwork (February through September 2013) consisted of offline ethnographic research, including (participant) observation and focus group meetings. I started my observations in the canteens of two schools in a medium-sized city; one school offering secondary vocational training (*vmbo)* and one school offering secondary education preparing for vocational college (*havo*) and academic learning (*vwo*).[12] I observed how pupils of the school dressed, including all body modifications and supplements to the body (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992), how they behaved and how they interacted with each other and with teachers.

[12] Schools in the Netherlands are highly segregated along ethnic and class lines, especially in primary education but also in secondary education. Young people with a non-Western and lower socio-economic background are 'overrepresented' in vocational training, which is often referred to in the Netherlands as 'lower' education. Even if their results are similar, primary school pupils with 'higher' educated parents are more likely to receive a 'higher level' advice for secondary education than their peers with 'lower' educated parents (Dutch Inspectorate of Education 2018). Racialised and classed inequalities are thus reflected in and reproduced by the Dutch educational system. Especially chapter 5 of this thesis discusses how young people navigate these and other inequalities in their digitally mediated sexual practices.

Similar observations were conducted in public transport, as I travelled to the schools by train and bus and thus followed the same route as many young people. These observations provided me with a general idea about young people's daily school life.

In one of these schools, I also supervised a high school research project, which Dutch pupils have to conduct in order to graduate (*profielwerkstuk*). This particular project was carried out in 2013-14 by three boys, and was aimed at analysing Facebook use among young people. Not only were the boys' research data interesting for me, but my role as a supervisor also allowed me to have some brainstorm sessions in which I learned about the boys' own experiences with and opinions about Facebook and other media.

Another set of offline observations was more specifically about sexuality and social media. These were observations of sex educations classes and observations of the performances of two theatre groups. The sex education classes took place in one of the schools mentioned above and were aimed at pupils in their first year. The school had separate classes for boys and girls with a male teacher for the boys and a female teacher for the girls. I was allowed to observe only the girls' classes (six classes in total). These observations gave me a chance to not only find out more about the girls' experiences and opinions, but also observe their ways of talking about sexuality in this specific context of the classroom.

I also observed shows of two theatre groups at different schools in the East of the Netherlands. One of these theatre groups performed a show about homosexuality, followed by a discussion about the topic with the pupils. I observed eight of these shows in three different schools offering different educational levels, attended by approximately 450 pupils in total. The other theatre group offered an interactive show about social media and sexuality, during which pupils were invited to comment. I observed six of these shows in three different schools offering different educational levels, attended by approximately 450 pupils in total. During these observations, I focused on verbal and non-verbal comments of the pupils to the topics of (homo)sexuality and social media.

Whereas the emphasis in the activities described above was on observation, two other activities had a more participatory character. First, I participated in two national meetings of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) from different cities in the Netherlands discussing sexual diversity in schools. During these meetings, I not only observed participants' dress, behaviour and interaction, I also participated in the discussions about sexuality and sexual diversity. This gave me an opportunity to find out more about the experiences and opinions of this particular group of young people, who often remain largely invisible in daily school life. On my way back home from one of these

meetings, I was in the same train as a group of pupils with their teacher, which resulted in a one-and-a-half-hour group discussion about sexuality and social media. Second, I participated in two school classes for two weeks each. Because those participant observations also marked the start of my online research, I will discuss these later.

After having observed in schools, public transport and at GSA meetings, six focus group meetings were conducted, to go deeper into young people's experiences with and opinions about sexuality and social media. Two of these meetings were with boys,[13] and four with girls.[14] Of all these focus group meetings, four were organised and chaired by me. Participants in these meetings were pupils from different ages and educational levels, and with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. At the start of these focus group meetings, I asked participants to name all social media they used, and wrote the name of each medium on a large sheet of paper. Subsequently, I asked the participants to name characteristics of each medium, and what they were used for. I wrote key words on memos and stuck these to the corresponding sheet. This method not only generated a comfortable atmosphere of 'creating something together', but also presented me (and the participants) with an interesting overview of media and (sexual) experiences, and of themes which were important to these young people (see picture on page 33).

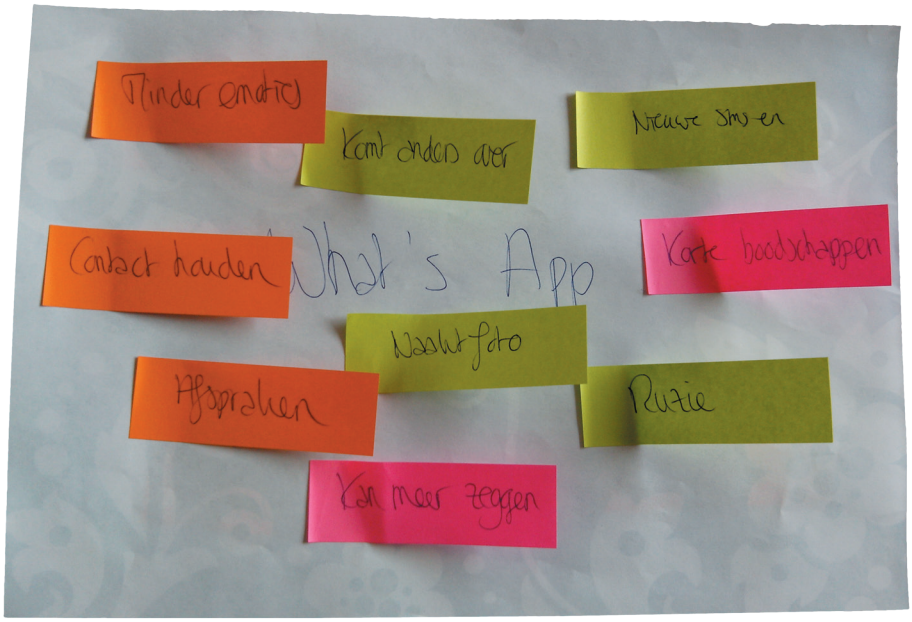
Next to these four focus group meetings, I joined two focus group meetings that were organised by MA-students whom I co-supervised.[15] The first was a focus group with girls identifying as (Dutch-)Antillean, about Facebook profile pictures; the second was a focus group with girls identifying as Christian, about social media, sexuality and religion. This was a unique chance for me to learn more about these specific groups of young people. Whereas the MA-students were insiders to these groups (although a bit older), I was an outsider, a combination which resulted in a good atmosphere and rich discussion. For example, the Antillean girls felt at ease combining Papiamento and Dutch, which the MA-student could understand, whereas I could use my lack of knowledge about Papiamentu to ask for more

[13] One with five boys, one with six. Despite being critical about gender as a category, I also observed that its effects are very real and for most young people the gender binary plays an important role in their daily life. To create an environment that felt 'safe' for participants, I decided to follow this categorisation of youth into 'boys' and 'girls', and organised separate focus group meetings. Although focus group participants appreciated this, it is a problematic choice that reinforces the gender binary (Rommes, Sørensen, and Faulkner 2011).

[14] Three with six girls, one with five girls.

[15] These were Queeny Eugenia and Marjoke Tiems. I supervised their MA-projects together with my supervisor dr. Els Rommes.

explanation. As was the case in earlier research (Eerdewijk 2007, 53-4), the focus group meetings proved to be particularly appropriate to discuss a sensitive topic like sexuality. Participants complemented each other's stories, asked each other questions and compared opinions, thereby creating room for new insights (Kitzinger and Barbour 1999, 4).



Picture 1. Discussing social media in a focus group meeting.[16]

Qualitative research 2: Online/offline participant observation, interviews, case studies

In the second part of my ethnographic fieldwork (October 2013 through February 2014), I started combining offline and online ethnographic research using the methods of participant observation and in-depth interviewing. With regard to the combination of online and offline participant observation, I follow Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas (2011, 126), who state that 'methodologically drawing a boundary between online and offline [...] experiences has been a weakness in prior research,' for instance because it denies the significance of online experiences in offline lives. Instead, Ringrose and Erikkson Barajas explicitly explore the dynamics between

[16] The small notes on the picture say: less emotions, comes across differently, the new texting, short messages, arguments, nude pictures, easier to say things, appointments/ dates, staying in touch.

online and offline practices, which augmented their understanding of young people's online content. I would add that this also works in a reversed way: online content also helps to better understand offline experiences. For me, combining offline and online research was helpful to gain a better understanding of how one specific situation was dealt with in different spaces, resulting in a more contextualised and in-depth understanding of participants' practices. On a more practical note, combining offline and online fieldwork provided me with access to more private spaces and practices (see also Leurs 2012; Spronk 2012). For example, online profile pages that were visible only to selected users became accessible, and WhatsApp conversations were shown or even sent to me.

In this phase of the fieldwork, I participated full-time in two school classes of the schools where I had started my research; a third-year class of secondary vocational training (*vmbo)* with 15 pupils, and a third-year class of secondary education preparing for vocational college (*havo*) with 26 pupils. I participated in each class for two weeks both offline and online, and after that kept following the pupils online for another week. To get the most out of this participation, I visited both classes one week earlier for about an hour, to introduce myself, talk with the pupils about their lives and use of social media, and of course to ask whether they wanted to participate in my research. In each class, only one pupil refused to participate; their activities are not included in this thesis. Those who wanted to participate provided me with their nicknames and telephone numbers, to establish online connections on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat.

During the first week of these participation periods, I participated in class both offline and online, observed how the pupils behaved and interacted, and did a lot of small talk (Driessen and Jansen 2013). In the second week, I continued the participant observation, and interviewed pupils to learn more about their activities in the previous week. This resulted in interviews with 18 pupils (7 out of 15 pupils in the school of secondary vocational training; 11 out of 26 in the school of secondary education preparing for vocational college), which lasted in general about 45 minutes each. Although this is relatively short, the interviews quickly went in depth, because the pupils already knew me and were used to my presence. In the interviews, I asked about things the interviewee had said or done online or offline the week before, and about their use of social media more generally, especially in relation to love and sexuality. Sometimes, the interview also involved reading profile pages or WhatsApp messages together. Because I was allowed to conduct these interviews during class, the pupils were very eager to cooperate. One girl even strategically offered me to show me her WhatsApp conversations, on the condition that this took place during specific classes.

Facilitating such creative navigations of the school system also helped me to build rapport and trust with the pupils (see also Krebbekx 2018) and gain access to more 'private' online data.

During the final months of my ethnographic fieldwork, I did additional online and offline research to gain more in-depth information about a number of cases or experiences that had come up during the first part of my fieldwork, but that I had not been able to study thoroughly because I did not know the right person, or because it was too private to discuss in school. For instance, several research participants mentioned the theme of online unwanted sexual solicitations, but none of them had experienced these themselves. Through purposive sampling, I selected participants to inform me about these cases. First, I studied two cases of unwanted sexual solicitations. I talked to the four girls involved both informally and during in-depth interviews, read the news items that were published about one of the cases, and had informal conversations with other people involved (e.g. family members). Second, I explored more in depth the social media use of queer young people, who often remained 'invisible' to a large extent in daily school life, by following two queer young people for a longer period of time. I analysed their 'public' online activities and profiles and talked to them about these both informally and during in-depth interviews. Moreover, I followed one of these participants during a 'purple Friday'[17] in his school, participating in the activities and talking with him and his schoolmates. Third, because I sometimes had easier access to girls than boys, as discussed earlier, I did additional fieldwork to study in more detail the making of heterosexual masculinity by following two boys online and interviewing them about their online profiles and activities. Fourth, I studied a case of heterosexual Internet romance, an experience that had been brought up several times by research participants, without any of them having experienced it themselves. Therefore, I put some additional effort into finding such a couple. I analysed the online profiles and activities of the boy and girl involved and interviewed them. Fifth, I interviewed a girl who watched porn and dared to talk about her experiences, which was remarkable in comparison to the general tendency among girls to avoid expressing interest in sex, let alone porn, out of fear for slut-shaming. With this girl, I discussed both her own experiences of watching porn as well as stereotypes and gendered assumptions about the practice. Sixth, I conducted a more in-depth analysis of the forum discussions that had come up during

[17] A day on which people are encouraged to show solidarity with queer movements by wearing something purple. In this particular school, several activities were organised by pupils, which I participated in.

the first part of my research, such as discussions about the 'average age' for having sexual intercourse for the first time. The nine interviews with 11 young people in this part of the research lasted about 1.5 to 2 hours each.

Quantitative research: Survey

In the final stage of my fieldwork (March through July 2014), I conducted a survey together with two MA-students.[18] The survey was an extension to the previous surveys in the Netherlands about youth, sexuality and social media (Graaf and Vanwesenbeeck 2006; Walle and Graaf 2010; Graaf et al. 2012), in the sense that it included a broader range of activities and mapped in more detail which sexual practices young people undertake in which social media places and with whom. A draft version of the survey, based on the qualitative data collected in the first phase of the research project, was reviewed by Hanneke de Graaf (Rutgers WPF) and Koen Leurs (London School of Economics and Political Science/Utrecht University), who provided useful comments to improve the survey.

After that, the survey was tested in a pilot with eight young people, who were as diverse as possible with regard to gender, age, educational level and sexual preference. We made sure that also young people with a 'lower' educational background were included, in order to make sure that the survey questions were not 'too academic'. Eventually, the group consisted of 5 boys and 3 girls; two first year pupils aged 13, three second year pupils aged 13-14, and three third year pupils aged 14-15; 4 pupils following secondary vocational education (*vmbo*) and 4 pupils following secondary education preparing for vocational university (*havo*); and 6 pupils who identified as heterosexual, 1 who did not know, and 1 who identified as homosexual. The pilot took place in another school than the schools where most of the qualitative research was done, to make sure that the survey was tested by other young people than the ones whose activities had been analysed for making the survey. This enabled me to check whether the questions and concepts were relevant and understandable for a broader group of young people. Additionally, the survey was tested individually by a transgender boy, to assess whether the survey was also adequate for young people who did not fit the traditional categories of 'boy' and 'girl'.

In the pilot, we asked the participants to fill out the survey and provide 'real-time' feedback either verbally (questions, comments) or by writing comments on the survey itself.[19] This way of conducting the pilot turned

[18] Nathalie Platter en Barbara Magnée.

[19] The final version of the survey was digital, but for the pilot we printed it on paper.

out to be very effective: if a participant did not understand a question or an answer, or missed an answer category, they could indicate that immediately. Eventually, the pilot resulted in a number of adjustments to the survey. As it turned out, the pilot with eight young people was also an opportunity to witness additional interactions among the participants about the topic of sexuality and social media. The conversation even continued for half an hour after the participants completed the survey, and turned into an interesting discussion about the relation between sex and sexuality, homosexuality, talking about sex, and sex education.

After the pilot, a final version of the survey was constructed. Participants were recruited in two ways. First, we asked schools to participate, because that would enable us to recruit young people with diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, religion and educational background. Moreover, we expected that conducting the survey during regular classes would increase participation and provide us with the opportunity to give instructions about the survey and monitor the process. Finding schools that were willing to participate was very hard however (see also Leurs (2012)), both because of practical reasons and to the topic of the survey. This last issue became clear in the response of a vice principal saying that he did not want to distribute the survey among the pupils of his school, because: 'some of the categories are about something that we, as a school, should stay away from, especially with regard to our youngest pupils. I know that this is part of our society nowadays, and that also children aged 12 encounter things like sex on the Internet, but I think that we, as a school, do not have to ask them these questions.' Eventually, only one school community was willing to cooperate, in a small town in the East of the Netherlands. In this school, which offered all levels of education, 13 classes (342 pupils) of different ages and educational levels participated in the survey. However, diversity with regard to ethnicity and religion was limited: the school consisted mainly of pupils identifying as white, 'autochtonous' Dutch, and as Christian or atheist.

The surveys were conducted digitally, which had several advantages: it was time-saving for us as researchers, we could reach a broader group of participants (as will be explained later) and the routing was easier for participants than it would have been on paper. Unfortunately, some computers got stuck during the survey. Those surveys were automatically deleted. Another disadvantage of conducting the survey digitally was that participants were able to look at each other's screens, as the computers were right next to each other, which could compromise privacy. Although we did ask participants to fill it out individually and respect each other's privacy, there was some talking and 'peeking' taking place. This did not necessarily

'corrupt' the answers: sometimes, the talking was no more than reading out loud a question or answer that was regarded as funny. At other times, pupils liked discussing the topic with the friend sitting next to them. To our request for privacy we repeatedly got the answer: '(S)he already knows all this about me, we are best friends!' Some young people even started talking together about their experiences. There were also instances when peeking was not appreciated however, but we noticed creative ways of dealing with this. One participant for instance looked at the screen of a classmate's computer while leaving the room. The classmate simply waited for him to pass by, saying that: 'You are not allowed to look at my answers.' When we saw such interactions, we helped and asked the pupils to respect each other's privacy; an argument to which participants usually responded positively.

Secondly, participants were recruited via an online community for queer young people, to increase the sexual diversity among participants. This was considered important based on the qualitative findings showing that queer young people sometimes faced different challenges than heterosexual young people. For example, for heterosexual romantic couples it was quite normal to show their relationship in public, both online and offline, as will be discussed in chapter four. These couples hardly ever received negative comments, except for some (teasing or serious) remarks that they were being too 'sticky' (*klef*). Same-sex couples on the other hand were practically invisible, and during interviews and participant observation I learned that this was related to (perceived) homonegativity and even violence against queer young people. To find out how this translated into online practices, we decided to also recruit participants via an online community for queer young people. Of this group, 427 respondents filled in the questionnaire.

After 'cleaning' the survey data, a total of 679 surveys remained. Because of our sampling methods, our survey reports about a wealth of experiences, but it is not representative and should thus be regarded as indicative. Of these survey participants, 99% owned a smartphone with Internet access (about half of them had a subscription for mobile Internet; the other half used Wi-Fi). WhatsApp was used most: 98% of all participants used this app, and 76% of all participants used it more than ten times a day. YouTube was used by 97% of all participants, Facebook by 85%, Snapchat by 77%, Skype by 75%, Instagram by 72%, Twitter by 62% and Jong&Out[20] by 54%. Other apps and websites, such as Tumblr, forums, dating apps, chat websites, virtual worlds and Ask.fm were used by less than half of our participants.

[20] *Jongenout* (in English Youngandout) is an online community for queer youth. It is hosted by COC, a large Dutch organisation for sexual diversity.

Method	Locations	Number (duration)	Participants
Part. observation	Canteens school A+B	5 visits (3-4 hrs each)	
	Public transport	±100 journeys (0.5-1.5 hrs each)	
	Sex education classes school A	6 class hours	18 girls (divided into 2 groups)
	Theatre group performances	14 shows (±1.5 hrs each)	±900 pupils from 6 different schools
	Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) meetings	2 meetings (1 day each)	±40 pupils and 25 teachers per meeting
	Participation school class school A	3 weeks (full-time)	15 (10 girls, 5 boys)
	Participation school class school B	3 weeks (full-time)	26 (10 girls, 16 boys)
	Social media	1.5 years (0.5-8 hrs per day)	
Focus group discussions		6 meetings (±2 hrs each)	34 (23 girls, 11 boys)
Group interviews	Train after GSA meeting / School C	2 (1.5 / 0.5 hrs)	12 (6 girls, 6 boys)
Individual&duo interviews	School A+B / Diverse locations	28 (45 min-2 hrs each)	29 (18 girls, 10 boys, 1 transboy)
Survey	1 school community / 1 online community		679 (360 girls, 227 boys, 92 other)

Table 1. Overview of research methods and number of participants per method.

1.5 Ethical considerations

Talking about sexuality with young people

While preparing and conducting my research, several ethical considerations were taken into account. In this and the following section, I will describe my considerations and choices with regard to two issues, namely that of talking about sexuality with young people, and that of doing open or covert research, which also includes the issue of consent. Discussing the topic of sexuality with young people is often seen as difficult, maybe even potentially harmful, as was expressed for instance by the school's vice principal whom I quoted earlier. Also a question of a colleague during a conference was telling. When I told her about my research project and methods, she was surprised and asked me: 'Are they [young people] able to talk about that [sexuality]?'

My answer was, and still is, yes, on the condition that the researcher is willing to hear young people's stories. This involves asking open-ended questions, following participants' ordering and phrasing, eliciting stories and avoiding 'why-questions' (Hollway and Jefferson 2000, 26-54). This may sound easier than it is, because it requires postponement of judgment (although this does not mean being uncritical) and asking more about experiences and opinions that you, as a researcher, do not necessarily approve of or agree with. Despite being hard sometimes, it is also a fruitful approach, and research participants were very willing to share their stories and ideas. For example, after a two-hour focus group meeting, the participants all wanted to extend the meeting, as they found it 'fun and important' to discuss their opinions and experiences. Especially young people belonging to a minority group, such as queer young people or young people from 'lower' educational levels, were keen on taking the chance to have their voices heard. As Driver (2007, 180) also experienced during her research with queer girls: 'In the face of invisibility and silence [...] many youth are pleased to have their words recognised as valuable and publicly meaningful.' Indeed, several young people, both from minority and majority groups, asked me to have their experiences and opinions integrated in sex education; a clear call for being acknowledged as experts on their own lives.

In the survey, there was less room for participants' own words and stories, but because the survey was based on qualitative research, and because we received very positive comments during the pilot, we were confident that participants would still agree to participate and 'talk' about their sexual experiences in social media. Indeed, only two girls expressed doubts about taking the survey, wondering if it would contain 'scary questions'. We emphasised that they could opt out, but they decided to participate and

concluded that 'there were some weird questions, but it was not that bad.' The fact that sometimes participants even stayed in the room to discuss the topic after they had completed the survey pointed at an eagerness to talk about the topic, rather than unwillingness.

Being sensitive about listening to young people becomes extra important when difficult or painful experiences or feelings are discussed (see also Hollway and Jefferson 2000, 26-54), and when questions may confront participants with disturbing memories (Eerdewijk 2007, 57). On the other hand, from my earlier research about sexual violence (e.g. Naezer 2009, 2011; Klungel and Naezer 2012), I learned that a confrontation with difficult memories does not have to be negative, as interviewees were often glad to talk about these with somebody who listened and asked questions without (showing) judgement. As Van Eerdewijk (2007) argues, during these conversations it is important to take the time to talk things over, invite participants to contact the researcher if they have any more questions or remarks, and facilitate contact with medical services. An additional 'strategy' that I took from my own experience is to emphasise before and during the interview that the interviewee has the final say in what they want to tell, and what is told on or off record.

In the present research project, there were a few instances in which difficult memories and situations were discussed. By using all 'strategies' discussed above, namely asking open-ended questions, following participants' ordering and phrasing, eliciting stories, avoiding why-questions, taking time for the conversations, emphasising the right of the participant to refuse an answer or to answer off record, and offering additional contact or help with finding professional care, these conversations went well, and participants were always positive about the interview. Indeed, some painful accounts were told off record, which allowed me a more in-depth understanding while respecting the interviewee's autonomy. Several interviewees expressed being pleased to use their negative experiences for the positive goal of helping others.

What also plays a role in ethnographic fieldwork, is the fact that the researcher is the main research instrument (Bernard 2002, 338). That means that not only professional skills, but also personal characteristics will influence an ethnographers' research project. Gender, age, sexual preferences, marital status, ethnicity, age, religion, interests and other personal characteristics make a difference in access to information and contact with research participants. Some of my personal characteristics were indeed markers of difference in my relationship with (some of) the research participants, such as my age (early thirties), gender (woman), sexual preference (heterosexual), ethnic background (white) and educational level (university). This led to exclusion from certain research sites, such as the

sex education classes for boys, and granted me entry into other research sites, such as the ladies' room. It also influenced my contact with research participants, as I was clearly 'similar' or 'different' in several respects. To some extent, I made an effort to neutralise differences with an open and interested attitude as described above, emphasising that I was interested in learning from young people, and that I wanted to alter the trend among adults to talk *about* young people without talking *with* them (see also Eerdewijk 2007, 55).

However, differences between the researcher and research participants can also be beneficial. On several occasions I emphasised specific personal characteristics to 'justify' my lack of knowledge on a certain topic and ask for more explanation. For example, during the focus group meetings, I emphasised the age difference, and asked the participants to explain to this ignorant adult what social media were all about for young people. Participants were very enthusiastic to explain to me all the ins and outs of their social media use. When I asked them for advice on which themes to analyse, which methods to use and which people to interview during my research, they provided me with useful and telling suggestions. Also research participants' actions worked to emphasise or diminish differences and similarities. For instance, by asking me to work together on a school task they diminished differences in age and education, while at other times, I was constructed as 'older and more knowledgeable' by research participants asking me questions about sexuality. Such a construction of difference is not necessarily negative however: in this case, it provided me with interesting insights into the questions young people wanted to ask an adult whom they considered to be an 'expert'.

Open or covert research

Another ethical consideration, next to the question whether it is possible to discuss sexuality with young people, is whether to do open or covert research. 'Open' and 'covert' are extremes on a continuum: in open research, the participants know that a research is being conducted and what it is about. In covert research, participants don't know anything about the research (Hart et al. 1998, 276-7).

My research was partly at the open and partly at the covert side of the continuum. The research was open in cases where there was actual (and mostly intensive) interaction between me and the participant. This was the case during participant observation in the two school classes, personal conversations (but not the plenary sessions) at the national meetings for GSA members, the additional case studies, and of course the focus group

meetings and survey. In those cases, I introduced myself and my research to the participants and asked for informed consent to include them in the study. I was open about the research for ethical reasons (Bruckman 2006, 89; Hine 2008, 262-5; Kozinets 2010, 147), for methodological reasons (I wanted to interact with these participants) and for practical reasons: some of these participants were also the ones whom I asked permission to access their private online profiles and WhatsApp conversations.

I often introduced my research as being about 'how young people use social media with regard to love, relationships and sexuality'. Sometimes, I added 'friendship' to that list. The aim of this broad description was both to include a wide range of practices, especially in the beginning of the research, and to avoid deterring potential participants: I figured that mentioning only 'sexuality' might evoke stereotypes that could prevent young people from participating, such as the stereotypes of the 'overly protective adult' or maybe even the 'pervert'. Therefore, I sometimes chose to be somewhat 'euphemistic' about my research topic, especially when introducing it for the first time.

In some cases, I also asked for parental consent. However, as Van Gogh and Reysoo (2005, 18-9) have argued, the claim for consent from legal representatives has power dimensions that implicate that certain groups (e.g. children) cannot speak for themselves. As a consequence, these groups are silenced. Because it was my goal to hear from young people, a group that has been silenced very often, I limited the number of cases in which I asked for parental consent. I only asked for parental consent in those parts of the research project that revolved around individual participants' experiences: the case studies and the participant observation in the school classes. For the participant observation in school classes, I discussed with the schools whether to ask for active or passive consent from parents. In one school, this resulted in active consent; in the other in passive consent. For activities in which individual experiences were less central, such as the focus group meetings, I refrained from asking parental consent. Again, this was decided in close consultation with the schools. Not asking for parental consent does involve a responsibility to minimise possible risks for research participants. I will come back to that later.

Another part of my research was covert, namely my observations in online and offline publicly accessible spaces. Offline, these included public transport, the school canteen and the performances of the two theatre groups. Online, these were forums and publicly accessible profiles. In studying these sites, I did not ask for informed consent. A methodological reason for this was that introducing myself as a researcher might influence the interactions I aimed to observe. Moreover, in contexts where large numbers of participants

come and go very quickly, such as the school canteen or an Internet forum, introducing myself was practically unachievable (Hine 2008, 265).

The choice to also conduct covert research, as well as the choice to partly refrain from asking consent from parents, brought with it the responsibility to limit possible risks for participants. For most research participants, the biggest risk was that other people would recognise their story in my writing and find out information that the participant might consider to be 'personal' or 'private'. Even when (inter)actions are publicly accessible, for those involved they may be experienced as if they were private. Although this expectation of privacy is to some extent misplaced (Walther 2002, 207), I do consider it an ethical obligation to respect participants' privacy. More concretely, this means that I put considerable effort into making participants anonymous. Because of this, no information is given in this thesis about the names or locations of participants, and sometimes, some details have been changed to prevent participants from being recognised. In those cases where copying online quotes would render individuals identifiable with help of search engines, I slightly reformulated the quotes, without changing their meaning (Hine 2008, 266; Kozinets 2010, 145). Original data are stored for future verification and for checking to which extent the data have been changed.

1.6 Data analysis

As described in the section on research methodology, my research is inspired by the grounded theory approach. Following later interpretations of this approach (Charmaz and Bryant 2008), I combined inductive and deductive coding (Fox 2008, 430-1) in analysing my data: some themes and codes were derived from the available literature (e.g. pleasure versus danger, identity, diversity, the role of space and affordances, and the relationship between online and offline space), while inductive coding enabled me to critically assess those codes, and to develop additional codes and themes (e.g. meeting new people, role models, honesty, maturity, smartness). This involved close reading and coding of the collected data, continuously asking what is happening in those data (Charmaz and Bryant 2008, 376).

After the initial phase of coding, I used the strategy of theoretical, or purposive, sampling to seek and sample data that informed my preliminary theoretical categories. This meant selectively seeking and sampling data that could be used to elaborate and/or refine those categories (Charmaz and Bryant 2008, 376). After having constructed a set of developed categories I identified how these were linked to each other and which patterns (and

deviations) could be identified; a search for similarities and differences, relationships, and hypotheses (Birks, Chapman, and Francis 2008, 71). These were the building blocks for a grounded theoretical model.

This resulted in the identification of four main dimensions of sexuality. The first dimension is that of sexuality as an *adventure:* an activity with uncertain outcomes that involves a mix of danger and pleasure. This dimension captures research participants' experiences with digitally mediated sexual practices that evoke both feelings of fear and disapproval (expressed through words such as 'risky' and 'dirty') and feelings of joy and excitement (expressed through words such as 'fun' and through laughter). The second dimension, which I labelled *romantic intimacy*, refers to research participants' experiences with and reflections on love, romance, flirting and dating; topics that played an important role in their daily online and offline lives and in discussions about sexuality. The third dimension is that of sexuality as *identity performance.* This dimension denotes research participants' reflections on the 'kind' of person they are, or want to be, in relation to digitally mediated sexual practices. These practices were often regarded as markers of identity, for instance as 'typical for girls', 'gay', 'smart' or 'immature', and navigating these connotations contributed to the performance of complex and sometimes contradictory identities. The fourth dimension summarises research participants' practices of and references to sexuality as a process of *knowledge building*, which includes for instance 'looking up information', 'learning', 'asking questions' and 'having conversations' about sexuality.

Distinguishing these four main dimensions (adventure, romantic intimacy, identity performance and knowledge building) allows for a discussion of the themes and experiences that were most prominent in research participants' daily lives, as well as the themes and experiences that were highly visible in media reports, sex education and academic research at the time of my study. Each dimension has been defined following the sex-positive perspective that was introduced at the beginning of this chapter: young people use social media for sexual practices, so there must be something in it for them. In each of the chapters, I explore one dimension of what this might be, and how young people construct and navigate the chances and challenges they encounter while engaging in specific digitally mediated sexual practices.

In the process of analysing research data, I constantly switched back and forth between 'emic' ('insiders') and 'etic' ('outsiders') perspectives. In switching between the two perspectives, I aimed to understand 'insiders' (young people's) categories and understandings of sexuality and social media, while at the same time remaining critical of these. As Cooper (2001, 191) argues, it is important to be careful about using 'native's categories', because

it brings the risk 'of being trapped in the very discursive structures one wishes to analyse'. Even though certain categories may be important to research participants, and therefore relevant to the researcher, this does not mean that they are useful as analytical categories, because the researcher risks taking for granted that these entities exist, instead of analysing how they are constructed (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Cooper 2001). Therefore, I alternated between emic and etic categories, with the aim of providing insight into young people's understandings of sexuality and social media, without taking their categories for granted.

The analysis of the survey data required quantitative analysis. I mostly used descriptive, univariate analysis: the examination of the properties of single variables and visualisation of these in graphic displays, tables and summary statistics (Bernard 2002, 516-7). This resulted in frequency distributions (e.g. how often do young people use particular social media) and measures of central tendency (e.g. the mean number of times young people use different media).

1.7 Structure of the thesis

In this introductory chapter I outlined my research aims and questions, defined the main concepts of my study, and elaborated on my methodological approach. In chapter 2, I will zoom in on previous research about youth, sexuality and social media, and introduce the four main dimensions of sexuality that will be explored in more detail in the remainder of the thesis. These are sexuality as an adventure (chapter 3), romantic intimacy (chapter 4), identity performance (chapter 5), and sexual knowledge building (chapter 6). In each of these four chapters, I discuss whether and how that specific dimension of sexuality has been discussed in previous research, and then provide a 'thick description' of my own findings, aimed at reaching a thorough understanding of the enactment of these four dimensions of sexuality. I conclude each chapter with a reflection on how my findings relate to previous research on that topic.

Chapter 3 focuses on the enactment of sexuality as an adventure. Two practices that that are often constructed in dominant discourse as 'risky behaviour' will be discussed: watching porn/sexually explicit materials and 'sexting'. By mobilising an interdisciplinary interaction between feminist studies and adventure studies, I investigate how young people's experiences challenge conventional notions of 'risk' and 'pleasure'. Based on that analysis, I explore the benefits of conceptualising young people's sexual practices as 'adventures' rather than 'risky behaviour'. Chapter 4 is about

sexuality as a romantic practice; a dimension of sexuality that received hardly any academic attention in relation to young people, while it is omnipresent in young people's stories and experiences. The chapter analyses how young people use social media in the context of romantic relationships, and how this may contribute to the enactment of romantic intimacy. In chapter 5, sexuality will be analysed as a process of identity performance. Focusing specifically on sexy pictures, this chapter explores how girls' navigations of sexiness are related to the performance of not just gender and sexuality, but also other interfering axes of social differentiation. Chapter 6 examines sexuality as a process of knowledge building. It investigates how sex education policies in the Netherlands, which are internationally celebrated as positive and empowering, can be improved to contribute more profoundly to young people's sexual empowerment.[21] In the concluding chapter, I return to my research questions and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my research, as well as my ideas for future research.

[21] All but one of the empirical chapters (2, 3, 5 and 6) have been published or were accepted for publication as separate articles. Because they are included in this thesis as they were/will be published, there is some overlap especially in the methodological sections. Moreover, the articles were published over a period of time, so some concepts that are used in earlier articles (chapters 2, 3, 6) have been replaced by other concepts in the other articles and chapters. For instance, I replaced the concept of 'online sexual practices' with that of 'digitally mediated sexual practices', and I replaced the concept of 'LGBT youth' with that of 'queer youth'.

Chapter 2

Adventure, intimacy, identity and knowledge

Exploring how social media are shaping and transforming youth sexuality

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Chapter 2

Adventure, intimacy, identity and knowledge

Exploring how social media are shaping and transforming youth sexuality

2.1 Introduction: Sexual risks, harm, and panic

> 'Does porn hurt children?' (*New York Times*, 2014)
> 'Swapping nude images spells danger for teens' (*USA Today*, 2017)
> 'Selfies "can fuel" body image worries says ChildLine' (*BBC*, 2014)
> 'The Dangers of Teen Sexting: Sexting a problem with major consequences' (*Psychology Today*, 2012)[22]

News headlines over the past few years show that public debates about young people's online sexual practices have tended to focus on the dangers posed by technology (Döring 2009; Livingstone 2011; Hasinoff 2015). Practices related to consuming, producing, and exchanging sexually explicit material, such as watching porn and 'sexting', are constructed as inherently harmful practices that damage young people, especially white, middle class girls (for a critique see Egan 2013; Mulholland 2017).

A risk and harm paradigm has prevailed through the dominance of high profile psychological research on youth, sexuality and technology. For example, researchers have investigated correlations between young people's consumption of 'sexually explicit material' or 'pornography' and negative developmental outcomes such as a view of girls and women as objects (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg 2007, 2009a), sexual dissatisfaction, sexual dysfunction (e.g. Peter and Valkenburg 2008) and sex-addiction (e.g. Cooper 2000; Delmonico and Griffin 2012). The phenomenon of youth 'sexting' (exchanging sexual text messages, pictures or videos, and having sexual conversations via webcams) has likewise been constructed largely as a technological risk, with research findings highlighting reputational

[22] Respectively www.nytimes.com/2014/03/29/sunday-review/does-porn-hurt-children.html?mcubz=3, www.bbc.com/news/education-36527681, www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/21/swapping-nude-images-spells-trouble-teens/23824495/, www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-27909281, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/teen-angst/201207/the-dangers-teen-sexting Accessed 28 September 2017.

damage, bullying, harassment, blackmailing, sexual violence including child pornography and forced prostitution, and even suicide (for overviews, see Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015). In addition, the practice of sharing (sexy) selfies has been constructed as the cause and/or evidence of psychological problems, such as narcissism and body dysmorphia (for overviews, see Burns 2015; Senft and Baym 2015).

The dominance of this risk and harm approach to technology, (social) media and youth sexuality has fuelled a discourse of youth sexualisation, both public and academic, that finds 'the media' in general, and social media in particular, responsible for making young people engage with 'too much too young' (Bragg and Buckingham 2009), set in contrast to a pre-technology childhood innocence (Fischer 2006; Robinson 2013). The overwhelming focus on risk and harm is problematic: it severely limits our view not only in terms of which practices are considered relevant (watching porn, sexting and sharing sexy selfies), but also in terms of which outcomes become known and imaginable (negative outcomes) (see also Hasinoff 2015; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015; Naezer 2018; Tiidenberg 2018).[23]

Moreover, the current dominant approach to technology, (social) media, and youth sexuality we have outlined is often stereotypically gendered and heteronormative: the majority of analyses are focused on girls, who are portrayed as victims of technology and/or boys and men who perpetrate harm via technology. In much of the research, boys and masculinity are naturalised as sexist and predatory and ignored as objects of study (Bragg 2015). These limited, gendered, and heteronormative 'moral panics' (Waskul 2006; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Robinson 2013; Hasinoff 2015), or the 'scary futurology' (Smith 2010) of youth sexuality, has resulted in the condemnation, policing, and pathologising of young people (Renold, Egan, and Ringrose 2015, 4).

In this chapter, we argue that this dominant anti-technology narrative in psychological research which informs many popular ideas about technological risk does not reflect the complexities of young people's experiences with sexuality and social media. We will use research from the fields of gender studies, queer studies, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy and media studies, as well as our own empirical data to argue for a more nuanced and complex understanding of social media's impact on youth sexuality. First, we will explore further the dichotomous thinking represented in present-day discourses about youth, sexuality, and social media. After that, we will go into the small, but growing number of critical, empirical studies that interrogate and challenge these dichotomies by focusing on young people's own experiences and perspectives, which are much more varied. Building on

[23] Naezer (2018) is also part of this thesis (chapter 3).

these studies, we explore our own research findings attempting to broaden the scope of public and academic debates by introducing four different dimensions of online sexuality. For each of these dimensions, we will discuss how young people's practices and ideas complicate stereotypical, gendered, and heteronormative narratives and dichotomies.

2.2 Deconstructing dichotomies about youth, digital technology and sexuality

In the introduction, we indicated how social media have been constructed as 'dangerous' (as opposed to safe) and 'bad' (as opposed to 'good'). In this section, we explore further two underlying dichotomies that seem to play a role in these debates: those of 'online' versus 'offline' and 'public' versus 'private'.

The idea of cyberspace as existing only in the interaction between machines and users has led many researchers (and policy makers, journalists, and other professionals) to conceptualise virtual space as separated from 'offline life' (also referred to as 'real life') (Hillis 1999, xiii). Over the last years, this dichotomy has been dramatically challenged through concepts like digital mediation (e.g. Doorn 2009). As danah boyd's extensive research points out, for teens, online and offline worlds are indeed tightly entwined: 'The performances that take place online are not isolated acts, disconnected from embodied settings, but rather conscious acts that rely on a context that spans mediated and unmediated environments and involves people who are known in both settings' (2008a, 128). This troubling of the online-offline dichotomy is reinforced by Warfield's analysis of young women's selfie-taking practices (2016). Her analysis reveals how selfies materialise through the image, but also through online and offline interactions with (including viewing and discussion of) images, challenging the online-offline (as well as the material-discursive) dichotomy.

Another dichotomy that seems to underlie debates about young people, sexuality, and social media is that of 'private' versus 'public', where the perceived 'private' nature of intimacy and sexuality (Plummer 2003; Reynolds 2010; Chambers 2013) is contrasted to the perceived 'public' nature of social media (e.g. boyd 2008b). In her theory of 'networked publics', boyd (2008b, 125-6; 2014) describes four properties that she considers fundamental to social media environments: persistence (communications are recorded 'for posterity'), searchability (search and discovery tools make it easy to find people and content), replicability/spreadability (content can be copied from one place to another), and scalability/visibility (the audience can potentially consist of all people across space and time). Although newer applications

such as Tumblr (unclear authorship, 'disorienting' architecture) and Snapchat (disappearing content) trouble this analysis (Cho 2015; Handyside and Ringrose 2017), the four properties distinguished by boyd are still dominant in our perceptions of social media, and contribute to concerns about 'the end of privacy.' They also contribute to warnings for youth, especially girls, not to perform 'private' or 'intimate' activities such as sexting in online spaces (Hasinoff 2015).

These privacy warnings for girls not only have a strong 'abstinence' character, they also seem to promote victim-blaming when things go wrong, and they deny the complex entanglements of 'the public' and 'the private' with regard to intimacy. For example, Pascoe (2010, 130-2) has pointed out that by 'publicly' sharing relationship information, partners signal to their networked publics, but also to their partner, that they are dedicated to the relationship. Moreover, Pascoe (2010, 119-20) argues, sexual and romantic relationships are, 'for all their emphasis on privacy and exclusivity, profoundly social.' Friends and peers play an important role in meeting and interacting with potential partners, in initiating, developing, and recovering from romantic relationships; and in learning from those experiences (see also Krebbekx 2018). 'The public' is thus not absent from 'the private', and public norms, practices, and institutions influence which 'private', intimate practices and feelings are legitimate and rewarding. What is important for our arguments about youth sexuality is that the public and the private are thus not two separate entities, and intimacy is not necessarily confined to the private sphere (see also Attwood, Hakim, and Winch 2017).

2.3 Critical studies of youth sexuality and social media

Critical studies about youth sexuality and social media are seeking to disrupt and move beyond 'moral panics' about digital technology (Hasinoff 2015) and a prime way to do so is to study experiences of sexuality and social media from the perspective of young people themselves (Renold, Ringrose, and Egan 2015). In this highly interdisciplinary field of research at the intersections of media studies, sociology, anthropology, and pedagogy, two main approaches may be distinguished: one that approaches the topic from a gender perspective, and one that approaches it from a queer perspective.

Gender researchers focusing on youth, sexuality, and social media have analysed how young people, mainly girls, construct gendered sexual identities or subjectivities through practices such as creating profiles, using applications, sharing pictures, tagging, and commenting on peers' pictures (e.g. Ridder and Bauwel 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013; Albury 2015; Warfield

2016; Renold and Ringrose 2017). These studies pointed out how boys and especially girls navigate double sexual standards and slut-shaming in a 'postfeminist' context (Gill 2007a, 2009; McRobbie 2009), where it is assumed that gender equality has been met, and where women and girls are increasingly encouraged to use their 'sexual freedom' to pursue sexual pleasure. Such a discourse of sexual liberation obscures how girls and women are called upon to produce themselves in a particular way, namely as desirable heterosexual subjects (Gill 2007b, 2009; Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010). Moreover, the post-feminist ideal of sexual freedom coexists with more conservative notions about women's and girls' sexuality, which holds girls and women responsible for upholding their sexual 'reputation' as modest, pure, innocent, and careful (e.g. Ringrose 2011). Boys on the other hand are pressured to present a heterosexualised, 'hard' masculinity through certain types of self-performance, as well as via technological affordances such as the 'phallic' collecting, posting, tagging and rating of girls' and women's digital bodies (e.g. Harvey and Ringrose 2015; Renold and Ringrose 2017).

Gender research about youth (hetero)sexuality and social media demonstrates how in some respects, young people's navigations of sexual norms are similar to older processes of identity performance, while at the same time they are also different. Slut-shaming practices for instance have been well documented historically, even if sometimes labelled differently, and are repeated in young people's online communication, but young people can also use social media affordances to challenge the norms underlying slut-shaming behaviours (e.g. by performing 'slutty' femininity as a positive, empowering subject position in online profiles) (Ringrose 2011; Dobson 2015). Moreover, social media enable young people to access a wide variety of knowledge, providing them with new techniques for the performance of gendered subjectivities. Examples of these techniques include the citation of 'porno scripts' and 'sexualised' online imagery and symbolism, which can be employed for the performance of 'sexy' femininity (Ringrose 2011). The affordances described by boyd (2008b, 2014) (persistence, searchability, replicability/spreadability, and scalability/visibility) make a difference, in that they add extra temporal, spatial, affective and performative dimensions to young people's online/offline practices. For example, sexy images of girls and women can be collected, saved and used by boys in their performances of macho, heterosexual masculinity (Ringrose and Harvey 2015a).

While the vast majority of gender research about youth sexuality and social media has focused on the user's performance of (gendered, heterosexual) subjectivities/identities, some research has been done on the role of social media in the performance of sexual and romantic relationships (most notably Pascoe 2010; Handyside and Ringrose 2017). Pascoe (2010) for instance

notes how social media mediate young people's courtship practices such as meeting, flirting, going out and breaking up. She analyses how technology impacts young people's courtship practices in terms of privacy, monitoring and vulnerability (2010, 138-45). Social media provide young people with a sphere of privacy, in which they can communicate with their significant others often beyond the gaze of adults. This allows them a certain freedom and permits them to have intensely emotional, vulnerable conversations, while at the same time rendering them potentially susceptible to the forwarding of personal information. Moreover, freedom is compromised by practices through which partners monitor each other in order to manage anxieties about betrayal, for example by checking a partner's digital communication with other people (see also Handyside and Ringrose 2017), which contributes to a structure of surveillance and control.

The ways that LGBTQ youth experience sexuality online have not been researched to nearly the same extent as (assumed) heterosexual youth, although we are seeing a welcome increase in studies recently (e.g. Hillier and Harrison 2007; Szulc and Dhoest 2013; Pullen 2014; Cho 2015; Albury and Byron 2016; Maliepaard 2017). One of the most pertinent findings of this research is that for some queer young people who experience isolation, loneliness, and rejection by their family or peers at home or in school, the Internet can be a 'haven' (Tropiano 2014, 57) where they can become part of a larger LGBTQ community , although Szulc and Dhoest (2013) found that among their research participants (both young people and adults), sexuality-related issues became less salient in their Internet use after their 'coming out'. Hillier and Harrison (2007) describe how many of their research participants met queer peers for the first time online, which helped them to combat feelings of loneliness and build a social network, through which they found not only recognition, friendship and love, but also relevant information about sexuality which they could not access offline. Cho (2015) shows how young people's investment in online networks can be highly political. Focusing specifically on queer young people of colour on Tumblr, his research makes clear that 'users connect based on shared passion to formulate a robust anti-statist, anti-heteronormative, anti-white-supremacist politics' (2015, 189), thereby challenging traditional notions of race, gender and sexuality.

2.4 The research study and focus

Building on these important studies of youth, sexuality and social media, and drawing on ethnographic data, we aim to offer a nuanced and complex understanding of how young people navigate both social and technological

structures in their online/offline sexual practices. The ethnographic data were collected during one and a half years of fieldwork among young people aged 12-18 in the Netherlands in 2013-14. Research methods included online and offline (participant) observation, six focus group meetings, 29 in-depth interviews, and a survey.[24] Research participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, sexual experiences/identifications, ethnicity, educational level, and class.

A case study of Kyra (15) and Mark's (17)[25] heterosexual relationship offers a thread for exploring four different dimensions of mediated sexuality via social media use: sexuality as (1) adventure, (2) intimacy, (3) identity, and (4) knowledge building. Kyra and Mark's relationship case study is not meant to be representative of how all young people navigate social norms and technological affordances in their online/offline sexual practices. Indeed, conceptually we use this case as a reference point for a discussion of digitally mediated sexuality, but in each section, we will also compare Kyra and Mark to other research participants, whose experiences were sometimes similar and sometimes rather different. A central point of focus is how all these experiences reproduce, but also challenge and disrupt heteronormative formations, including stereotypically gendered, heteronormative dominant discourses about youth sexuality and social media.

2.5 Mediated experiments and sexual adventures

The first dimension of digitally mediated sexual experience we explore is that of sexual experimentation and adventure made possible through online networks. In an interview that happened to fall on their six-month dating anniversary, Kyra and Mark elaborated on the role played by social media in their relationship. The couple first met on *Chatlokaal* (which translates as Chatroom), a Dutch chat box that is comparable to the international Chatroulette, where people can anonymously chat with others with whom they are randomly connected by the application. If conversation partners do not want to continue the conversation, they can simply click a button in order to be connected to somebody else. It is impossible to look people up, since users don't make profiles, so meeting a person two times is only possible through coincidence. An important difference between Chatlokaal and Chatroulette is that Chatroulette allows the use of webcams, which is not possible on Chatlokaal.

[24] For more discussion of the methodology of this study see Naezer (2017).

[25] This case study was previously discussed in Naezer (2015a). All names are pseudonyms.

On a boring evening during the summer holidays, Kyra and Mark both decided to take a look on Chatlokaal. Kyra: "It was 12 PM and I couldn't sleep because of the heat, I got bored, so I decided to go do something on my phone. I went to Twitter, and Twitter gave me a link to Chatlokaal." Just like Kyra, many other young people described websites such as Chatlokaal and Chatroulette as a place to go to if you are bored and want to have some fun. For example, a boy explained in an interview: 'We always did Chatroulette with a group of boys. We talked to girls, from Poland for example. Nothing serious, just to have some fun.' Online chatting with unknown people can thus be a way of countering boredom.

Social media like Chatlokaal and Chatroulette have a reputation for attracting adult men looking for sexual interactions with girls. Research participants were well aware of this reputation and it never took long before it was brought up in conversations. Kyra for instance said: 'Normal conversations are exceptional [on websites like Chatlokaal]. More often people are like: "I'm horny, looking for a girl ..." If that happens, I'm always like: ok, click, gone, bye! I don't like that.' Kyra characterised such sexualised encounters on Chatlokaal as unpleasant, and tried to avoid them as much as possible by ending the conversation when a conversation partner was much older, or when a conversation partner made a sexual remark.

Other research participants experienced the sexual aspect of these websites differently however. During a focus group meeting with girls, one of the participants brought up Chatroulette, causing hilarity as the girls started recounting stories about their encounters with 'dirty men' who exposed naked body parts, masturbated in front of their webcam, asked sexual questions and made sexual requests. The girls talked about their encounters with these men with obvious heightened affect in the form of excitement, thrill, pleasure, and what we interpret as a sense of power. They laughed approvingly at each other's stories about how they reacted to the 'dirty men' (usually by calling them names and/or ending the conversation), showing that both their participation in Chatroulette as well as their offline discussions about those adventures can be interpreted as forms of 'affective' friendship and solidarity mediated through digital technologies (Cho 2015).

Adult professionals (academics, teachers, health workers, police officers) with whom we discussed this often expressed concerns, and searched for ways to protect young people, especially girls, against this sexual contact with adult men. While this may be helpful in some instances, like in Kyra's case, it could prove problematic in the cases of research participants experimenting with fun and humour when visiting chat rooms such as Chatlokaal and Chatroulette with the expectation of engaging in sexual interactions. Finding and laughing at 'dirty men' was for them a way of having fun, experiencing an 'adventure'

(Naezer 2018), alone or together with friends. The anonymity in this case, and the fact that conversations can be ended with just one mouse click, gave participants a feeling of safety and control.

Albury and Byron (2016) found in relation to feelings of safety that LGBTQ youth feel more protected initiating intimacy via hook-up apps on their mobile phone than interacting in offline spaces like school. In this case, the anonymity and random connections of platforms like Chatlokaal are counter to boyd's notions of persistence (communications are not -necessarily- recorded for posterity), searchability (finding specific people and content is -nearly- impossible) and scalability/visibility (unless someone records and shares the conversation, it is not visible for others). It offers a place of adventure, experimentation, friendship, and fun for participants in ways that counter dominant narratives of social media harm. That is, a practice that is generally regarded as 'dangerous', might not necessarily or exclusively lead to harm (see also Naezer 2018).

Another finding that troubles present-day discourse about youth's use of social media is that risk is a subjective concept (Naezer 2018). Different researchers and research participants disagree about what is risky and what is the most relevant and/or most threatening risk. For instance, receiving sexual questions, remarks or images may be experienced as a very relevant and threatening risk of online chatting by some youth like Kyra, but not by others, like the girls who participated in our focus group meeting. Moreover, several queer research participants pointed out other risks that were much more relevant and threatening to them, namely the possibility of other people 'finding out' about their sexual identification, desires or activities, and the possibility of (digital) violence. For these research participants, online adventures such as the one described by Kyra and Mark often involved distress and anxiety along with excitement and adventure, which sometimes lead them to avoid these spaces altogether, thus limiting their opportunities for engagement online. Thus we need to account for the diversity with regard to how sexual risk is experienced online and to question when risk actually leads to harm or not (Livingstone 2008).

2.6 Developing digital intimacy

A second dimension of digitally mediated sexuality is the development of relational intimacy. For Kyra and Mark, at some point in their first conversation, the anonymous and volatile character of Chatlokaal started to become a barrier. They felt like they were 'connecting', and needed a more stable medium: 'Because [on Chatlokaal], if your mobile crashes, you lose

him, and I did not want that to happen' (Kyra). Even though the couple wanted to 'move' to another medium, they were very careful about exchanging 'personal' information (even though they had already had a rather 'personal' conversation). Kyra reproduced the well-known trope of the catfish[26]: 'If you give that person your phone number, and he turns out to be somebody else ...' Therefore, they decided to use Kik first, which is comparable to MSN and affords chatting without exchanging phone numbers but with the use of a personal 'identification code' so that people are traceable. As mutual trust built up, Kyra and Mark moved again to Viber, a service that affords making phone calls (and, since 2014, also video calls) for free, using the Internet. Only after that, they exchanged phone numbers and 'talked' via WhatsApp. Moreover, they had conversations on Skype, with a webcam. With each 'step', Kyra checked whether Mark was really Mark: she analysed his online profiles and asked him to send her pictures via WhatsApp, which she checked using Google. For Kyra, their Skype conversation was the definite confirmation that Mark was indeed the 17-year-old boy he claimed to be. Mark did not conduct any research about Kyra, which reflects contemporary discourse that mostly focuses on girls as the vulnerable population in online intimacy, and that encourages girls more than boys to take safety measures.

Kyra and Mark's case complicates easy assumptions about online behaviour and risk. Kyra's advanced strategies to check on Mark contradict the stereotypical notion of girls as foolish or thoughtless, and incapable of 'protecting themselves', while Mark's lack of such strategies contradicts the notion of boys as 'in control'. Their choices also reproduce a gendered danger discourse however, which constructs girls as vulnerable (and responsible for protecting themselves) and boys as predatory. While to some extent and for some young people, the checking up may be a pleasant aspect of online romance, the emphasis on girls as vulnerable and responsible for protecting themselves also limits their freedom to 'carelessly' enjoy their romantic adventures.

Kyra and Mark became increasingly attracted to each other and wanted to meet each other offline. Unfortunately, they lived far apart: he lived in a big city in the West of the Netherlands; she in a small village in the East of the country. To some extent, social media offered a solution. Mark explained: "She sent me pictures of Nando, the dog, and of her house and the surroundings. And that all becomes real at that moment. It becomes reality." About their Skype conversations Kyra said: "If there is a good Internet connection, you really feel like: I'm talking to him." Mark added: 'You're

[26] A catfish is somebody who pretends to be someone else online, in order to pursue romantic and/or sexual relationships and/or sexual abuse.

talking for fifteen minutes and you hardly notice that there is a distance.' Geographical distance almost 'dissolved' as Mark and Kyra exchanged love, attention, and commitment in their highly affective, digitally mediated interactions, thus creating their own intimate space or 'mobile intimacy' (Hjorth and Lim 2012).

Several research participants indicated that such conversations could also become more sexual, and talking about sex or doing 'sexual things' was often considered easier via social media such as WhatsApp than offline. One girl described such conversations as potential turn-ons:

> You're not together, but you can be aroused. And then it's fun to tease the other. That one of you says 'I miss you', or 'I think about you', or 'I get turned on', and that you send something like: 'I can't be with you right now, but here's a picture of me; that's all I can do for you at this moment'.

In cases such as these, media serve not to bridge geographical distance, but to emphasise or use it in order to extend and remediate sexual interactions.

Intimacy is not limited to 'private' online spaces however. Kyra and Mark for instance also included each other in their online profiles on Twitter and Facebook, after a few months of online dating and meeting several times in person offline, thereby creating a public intimacy that defied their physical separation and distance. For instance, Mark's profile picture was a picture of him and Kyra and his Twitter name was her name with a heart next to it. His biography read, in a mix of English and Dutch: 'I'll love you forever @[Kyra], she means the world to me ♥♥ 18'07'13 ♥', the latter being the date on which they officially started dating. It's interesting that in the first part of this quote he addresses Kyra ('I'll love you forever'), while in the second part, he talks *about* her, to a more general audience ('she means the world to me'). This makes clear that he also addresses a larger audience in expressing how much he loves her. Apparently, the (semi-)public character of the pictures and messages is important, as he confirmed during the interview: 'Otherwise it is as if the other is not important to you.' For Mark, publicly performing the relationship online was a way of showing his love and his commitment to Kyra. Social media such as Twitter, on which you can make a profile, afford this public performance of intimacy and the construction of a normative relationship via digital imagery. While to some extent this is comparable to offline public performances of intimacy, such as wearing a pendant with a partner's initials, or kissing and cuddling in public spaces such as the school, it is also different both in terms of the techniques that are available and in terms of persistence, searchability, replicability/spreadability, and scalability/visibility of the information (boyd 2008b, 2014).

We also want to point out that not all groups are able to harness the affective opportunities of social media for building intimate, romantic relationships in the same ways. Young people who are in non-normative relationships such as same-sex and socially mixed (e.g. ethnically mixed, interreligious, mixed-age, mixed-class and mixed-popularity) relationships, and relationships that started or largely take place via social media, often do not dare to show off this relationship online, afraid of negative reactions (see also Ringrose 2011). Lana explained about her present relationship with a girl:

> When we started dating, I had already had my coming out[27] in school, but she hadn't. At one moment, I changed my relationship status on Facebook, and I changed my profile picture into a picture of us together. And she did the same. For her, this was her coming out.

This demonstrates how for young people in queer relationships, every (semi-) public statement about that relationship automatically feels like a highly political and potentially dangerous revelation.

As has been illustrated in other research, depending on the school context, claiming a non-normative gender or sexual identity makes young people vulnerable to targeting and negative comments (e.g. Payne and Smith 2013). Couples in non-normative romantic involvements are less likely to receive support from their social network and society in general, and more likely to encounter negative reactions when appearing in public (Lehmiller and Agnew 2006, 41; McGlotten 2013). For several research participants who were in a non-normative relationship, fear of such negative reactions was a reason not to make their relationship public online: 'I was not "out", so I had to hide my relationship, also on social media' (Connor, 18). Els, who was 16 and in a relationship with a 30-year-old man when she was first interviewed, reflected on this three years later:

> I did not post anything about our relationship on social media. It was all much too complicated, with my parents who didn't agree ... Other people at some point change their status, "in a relationship with ...", but I didn't. I was afraid of other people's reactions. [...] I did find it a shame that I wasn't able to do that. I would have loved to show the rest of the world that he was mine!

[27] The 'coming out' trope is highly popular in the Netherlands, although it has been severely criticised for presupposing an essentialist and static idea of sexuality and subjectivity, and for creating false dichotomies of living 'in the closet' versus living 'out of the closet' and of homo- versus heterosexuality (Butler 1991; Sedgwick 2008 [1990]).

Only a few research participants in non-normative romantic relationships did publicly perform their relationship online, resulting in both positive and negative reactions. For Bob (14), the latter was the case: 'They [pupils at his school] yell at me: "hey, out of the closet", or "hey, gay". [...] Most of the time I can deal with it, but sometimes [...] I call in sick, otherwise I'd explode.' Thus where Kyra and Mark could publicly perform their relationships on social media without fear or risk of harm, young people in non-normative romantic relationships feel like they have to keep their relationship secret as they are concerned about the possibility of negative reactions which limits their opportunities to use social media for building intimacy through public performances of their romantic relationships.

2.7 Performing smart and mature sexual identities

A third dimension of sexuality that came to the fore through the case study data is that of youth performing 'smart' and 'mature' sexual identities in ways that can simultaneously reproduce and challenge moral panic discourses. During a discussion of whether Kyra and Mark exchanged 'intimate' pictures of themselves, Kyra explained:

Kyra:	I never have stupid pictures ... Never made stupid pictures of myself.
Interviewer:	What are stupid pictures?
Kyra:	Undressing for a picture, I don't do that. Do I look like a fool to you?

Kyra explicitly linked the making of nude images to 'stupidity', vehemently rejecting the possibility of making such an image. This echoes and reproduces familiar slut-shaming and victim-blaming tropes surrounding girls who engage in the practice of making but more importantly sharing sexy pictures, of which girls are keenly aware (Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; Ringrose and Harvey 2015b; Henry and Powell 2016; Richards 2017). Girls' fear of being called a slut has often translated into a negative attitude towards displaying sexiness online (Duits and Zoonen 2011; Ringrose 2011; Jackson and Vares 2015). By so strongly associating undressing for a picture with being stupid, and by distancing herself from such pictures in the interview, Kyra performed a specific feminine 'self' that was not only sexually *modest*, but also *smart* (not foolish).

Mark likewise mentioned that he too never undressed for a picture or in front of a webcam, because: 'that will only cause trouble.' Even though

Mark joined Kyra in rejecting the online exchange of sexy pictures, he did not connect this to his own personality or identification as something that would make him a 'fool' as emphasised so strongly by Kyra. While they both responsibilised themselves as having to make 'good' decisions online, which was probably reinforced by the fact that they were interviewed by an adult, highly educated researcher, the implications of 'trouble' for Kyra were stated with much greater affective intensity, because of the perceived link between 'trouble' and being sexually adventurous for girls, as well as the perceived link between 'trouble' and reprehensible personality traits ('stupidity').

Another aspect of identity was highlighted by Mark when we discussed the couple's future:

> Interviewer: Do you talk about the future with each other?
> Kyra: Mark does, but I don't.
> Mark: She doesn't. I'm the one wondering: how about our future? Kyra doesn't. But she's still young [...] If she wants to date other boys first, I can understand that.

Both during the interview and in his online displays of love, Mark repeatedly emphasised that he is serious about the relationship, and dreams of a future together with Kyra. By attributing Kyra's lack of interest in building a future together to her 'being young', and contrasting this to his own commitment to the relationship, he positions himself as more mature. Contrary to dominant conceptions of boys as invested in performing sexual prowess online, Mark performed commitment and (sexual) maturity by emphasising the 'serious' and lasting nature of his relationship with Kyra, both online and offline.

Thus we see here how young people use social media for claiming 'smartness' and 'adultness' through performances of specific types of responsible, serious and mature sexual practices and relationships, in contrast to the types of gendered public discourses about young people (girls) perpetually at risk because of naivety and inexperience as they navigate intimacy online.

These processes of identity performance are even more complicated for queer youth, whose experiences are practically invisible in dominant, heteronormative discourses about sexuality. This invisibility makes it much harder to perform 'selves' that are recognisable for others. They are less likely to receive support from their social network and society in general, and more likely to encounter negative reactions when appearing in public (Lehmiller and Agnew 2006, 41, McGlotten 2013, Payne and Smith 2013). For many queer youth, especially those who were not 'out', performing

maturity through public (online) performances of serious relationships was therefore complicated or even impossible.

A more common way for these young people to perform maturity was to emphasise their 'acceptance of' and 'openness about' their own queer identity or desires, and/or knowledge about sexual diversity, which is quite different from heterosexual youth performing idealised forms of heterosexual relationships. For example, during a national meeting of Gay Straight Alliance members, Leroy (15) gave a presentation and recounted: 'I told a friend that I was gay, and that friend told it to somebody else, who posted it on Twitter. At first, I was devastated, but now I post about it myself. I'm not ashamed anymore.' This narrative of 'coming of age through the acceptance of and openness about one's queer identity' was common both offline and online. Even though the narrative itself is familiar, what is significant is that social media's affordances of sharing can magnify exposure; negotiating this visibility and overcoming shame and stigma is therefore understood as a sign of queer maturity.

2.8 Sexual decision making, knowledge building and sharing

In this final section, we discuss a fourth dimension of digitally mediated sexuality, namely that of sexual knowledge building/sharing and decision making. In negotiating the physical aspects of their relationship, Kyra and Mark explored various forms of contraception including the pill. As is common in the Netherlands, Kyra first went to her GP, together with her mother: 'He did not really explain much. Well, he explained things, but it was very short.' She found it 'awkward' to ask for more information, because her mother and a doctor's assistant were also present at the conversation. Back home she consulted with Mark and both visited Sense.info, a Dutch website funded by the Dutch government and hosted by two NGO's (SOA Aids Nederland and Rutgers), the communal health centres (GGD) and the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM). On this website, young people can chat online with health professionals about sexuality. This worked much better for Kyra than the offline appointment with her GP: 'Online, you're anonymous, whereas in real life [offline], everybody knows who you are.' Mark noted that not only the anonymity, but also the lack of face-to-face contact is key: 'You don't see each other, you don't hear each other, you can be completely yourself.' The affordance to remain (partly) anonymous and to 'talk' without face-to-face contact makes the Internet and social media and chat services particularly suitable for sexual knowledge building.

According to Kyra and Mark, another advantage of the Internet and social media in terms of sexual knowledge building is that a vast amount of information about sexuality from a multitude of perspectives and sources is available online which may be missing from people's offline worlds at school or in the family. In particular the opportunity to learn and get information from peers through media such as forums and chats is highly valued:

Kyra:	The GP gives you information, but if a young person provides it, you get an opinion. And I liked that better: what do you think about that particular pill, those kinds of things.
Mark:	Peers are the people you hang out with; you don't hang out with your GP.
Kyra:	[...] Young people [...] are like yourself.

According to Kyra and Mark, peers feel 'closer', more 'alike' and can therefore be a more trusted or relatable source of information than adults. In their search for information about contraception, the Internet and social media enabled them to get into contact with peers in a way not possible in their offline communities. What is significant about these complex knowledge building practices is that faced with the limitations of an (awkward) physical encounter with her GP (alongside her parent), and a perceived lack of knowledgeable peers in her offline network, Kyra works alone and together with Mark digitally to build sexual knowledge and perform sexual decision making (see also Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen 2017).[28]

We would like to note further that young people are not only consuming knowledge about sex and sexuality via websites and social media, but also developing and spreading knowledge (Cho 2015; Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen 2017; Ringrose and Mendes forthcoming). This means that digital knowledge building goes further than just 'seeking information' online: it also involves young people creating textual and visual digital materials which they share online. Indeed, one queer participant, Lana, made a 'coming out' video about her own process of 'accepting' her attraction to girls, uploaded it to YouTube and posted a link to the video on her Tumblr page. In its first 4.5 months on YouTube, the video was watched over 600 times. Through such activities, young people contribute to the development and mainstreaming of knowledge about sexual diversity (see also Byron and Hunt 2017). This empirically substantiates the notion of young people as 'produsers' (Bruns 2013), that is curators who simultaneously produce and use ('produse') digital knowledge that may be missing from not only dominant discourses but the

[28] Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen (2017) is also part of this thesis (chapter 6).

spaces and places conventionally understood to be where young people can learn about sexuality (see also Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen 2017).

2.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored Kyra and Mark's heterosexual relationship together with a range of other participants' normative and non-normative experiences and identifications of negotiating sexuality online. We aimed to show how a risk-centred approach is one-sided, failing to grasp much of the complexity of how young people are navigating social media and how digital mediation is transforming youth sexuality. Through our analysis, a more nuanced picture arises that illustrates different dimensions of how social media is offering (1) new routes for sexual adventure and experimentation (e.g. chatting randomly with unknown people), (2) new digital ways of building romantic intimacy (e.g. through online 'private' conversations or 'public' declarations of love), (3) new themes and venues for performing sexual identities (e.g. performing 'smart femininity' through the rejection of digital 'stupid pictures', or performing 'maturity' through online displays of a romantic relationship or online openness about queer desires), as well as (4) new routes for sexual decision making and knowledge building (e.g. conducting real-time, anonymous conversations that require no face-to-face contact, with people who may not be accessible offline).

Social media transform youth sexuality enabling forms of communication that are not as accessible or even impossible offline, such as (anonymous) conversations with people who are not physically near, which may be 'dirty men' exposing their genitals for a webcam, (potential) romantic partners sending romantic or sexual messages, health care professionals providing advice about topics like contraception, or (non-normative) role models providing knowledge, support and inspiration. Social media also afford public displays of romantic relationships, which can work in performative ways to establish relationships, and/or to enact specific (e.g. 'queer', 'smart', 'mature') sexual identities. We have expanded boyd's characterisation of digitally mediated interaction as more persistent, searchable, replicable/spreadable and visible by showing how in some digital contexts, such as WhatsApp, Chatlokaal and Sense.info, it is in fact the (semi-)privacy, (semi-) anonymity, and the non-persistent, non-searchable, non-replicable/spreadable, and/or non-visible nature of the communication that facilitates new forms of communication such as knowledge building.

Our analysis has shown that the dichotomies that are so pervasive in present-day dominant discourse are not a reflection of how social media work

for young people nor how they use these digital contexts in performing their sexuality. These digital platforms are not simply 'good' or 'bad', 'dangerous' or safe', therefore; they are dynamic, complex, subjective and sometimes contradictory constellations of risk, safety and pleasure. Neither do sexual practices take place simply 'offline' or 'online': these worlds are entangled confirming previous research disrupting this false dichotomy. Analyses of young people, sexuality and social media should therefore take these complexities into account and avoid simplistic, binary conclusions about youth, sexuality and/or social media.

Finally, our analysis shows how young people's online/offline sexual practices are profoundly social, and young people are constantly navigating dominant discourses that are ageist, sexist and heteronormative. We have demonstrated how young people are active agents negotiating these discourses in highly complex ways. Sometimes they reproduce sexist and heteronormative narratives (recall for instance Kyra's equation of girls who undress for images as fools). On the other hand, they refute assumptions about them being immature and unable to sustain meaningful intimate relationships. Some young people were highly critical of heteronormative narratives and structures, as was exemplified by young people using social media to 'queer' their identities and digital social spaces. These complexities directly challenge present-day stereotypical, gendered and heteronormative moral panic over social media's impact on youth sexuality, while confirming the need for contextualised studies of how young people navigate technological affordances and dominant discourses in their online/offline performances of sexuality.

Chapter 3

From risky behaviour to sexy adventures

Reconceptualising young people's online sexual activities

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Chapter 3

From risky behaviour to sexy adventures

Reconceptualising young people's online sexual activities

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 sociocultural 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.

3.1 Introduction

Present-day western discourse about young people and sexuality centres around the concept of risk (Gilbert 2007, 49; Chmielewski, Tolman, and Kincaid 2017). 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 1992 [1986]) 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 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 Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015).

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 theory 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. Vance 1984; Fine 1988), 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 2008a; Karaian 2012; Ringrose et al. 2013; Robinson 2013; Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013; Burns 2015; Karaian 2015; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015; Renold, Ringrose, and Egan 2015). 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, 307-8). 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 sociocultural 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.

3.2 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[29] with Dutch young people, mainly in the eastern part of the country. Offline participant

[29] Three focus group meetings were conducted by the author together with a number of Master's 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 Master's students – Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée. All the other focus group meetings were conducted and chaired by the author.

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.[30] The survey was an extension to previous Dutch surveys about youth, sexuality and social media (Graaf and Vanwesenbeeck 2006; Walle and Graaf 2010; Graaf et al. 2012), 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 community offering pre-vocational and academic secondary education in a small town in the East of the Netherlands. The pupils were 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.

[30] The survey was conducted by the author with the help of two Master's students, Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée.

3.3 '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 rather 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; 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 (Peart, Rosenthal, and Moore 1996; Logie and Gibson 2013; Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016). Historically, HIV has been associated with specific categories of people (most notably gay men), while other categories of people and sexual activities are 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 (Newmahr 2011; Gregori 2013; Khan 2014). 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 2008a; Karaian 2012; Ringrose et al. 2013; Robinson 2013; Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013; Burns 2015; Karaian 2015; Renold, Ringrose, and Egan 2015). 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; Hasinoff 2015; Eikren and Ingram-Waters 2016). 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.

3.4 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 (1992 [1986]) 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.[31] These activities confront

[31] 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.

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. Sung, Morrison, and O'Leary 1996; Taylor, Varley, and Johnston 2013; Black and Bricker 2015) 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, 309-10) 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 Lupton 1999; Tulloch and Lupton 2003; Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015).

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, Rommes, and Jansen 2017; Naezer and Ringrose forthcoming).[32]

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

[32] Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen (2017) and Naezer and Ringrose (forthcoming) are also part of this thesis (chapters 6 and 2).

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.

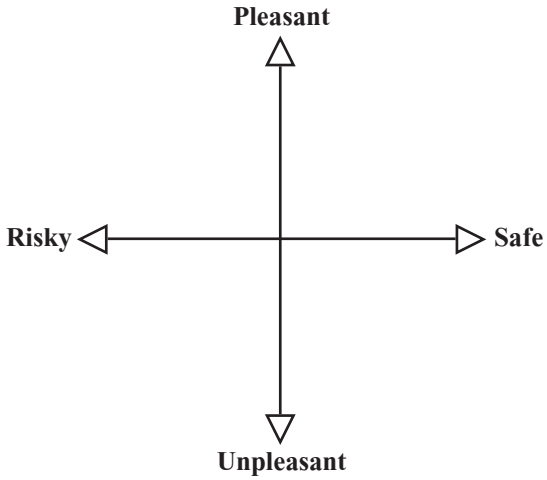

Figure 1. The adventure approach: distinguishing risks and outcomes.

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. Franke 2001; Dean 2008; Newmahr 2011; Gregori 2013; Khan 2014; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015), 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. Vance 1984; Fine 1988). 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, 7). Instead, Franke argues, it is actually the proximity to danger that 'creates the heat' (2001, 7): 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 Newmahr 2011; Khan 2014). 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,[33] (the expectation of) seeing naked men played a double role. During a focus group discussion with girls,

[33] 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.

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, sociocultural 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 (Lupton 2006; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015). This context includes social relations around, for instance, gender, age and sexual identity (Tulloch and Lupton 2003; Laurendeau 2008; Brown and Fraser 2009).

Feminist sociologists Giritli Nygren, Montelius, 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 and Olofsson 2014; Montelius and Giritli Nygren 2014; Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016). 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 Payne 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Ringrose 2011; Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011; Kofoed and Ringrose 2012; Ringrose et al. 2013; Albury 2015; Dobson 2015; Ringrose and Harvey 2015b; Lamb et al. 2016; Richards 2017; Naezer and Ringrose forthcoming). 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 Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011, 133-4; Giritli Nygren, Öhman, and Olofsson 2016). 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.

3.5 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 sociocultural 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.

Chapter 4

Digital intimacies

Teenagers, social media and romantic relationships

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Teenagers, social media and romantic relationships

Abstract

In academic research about teenagers' use of social media, romantic intimacy is hardly a topic of interest, and empirical studies about this topic are scarce. Theoretical reflections on the potential impact of social media emphasise instead the possibilities of abuse, and warn us about social media isolating people from each other and annihilating intimate relations. Also in popular debates, social media are regarded as a threat rather than a contribution to young people's intimate relations. In this chapter, I aim to nuance these 'intimacy panics' by exploring how teenagers use social media to enhance intimacy within the context of romantic relationships. More specifically, I explore how teenagers perceive and navigate social media's chances and challenges in relation to two highly common, digitally mediated romantic practices: conducting 'intensive conversations' and the 'public' display of love. It will be argued that both spaces that are constructed as private and spaces that are constructed as public, as well as spaces that are constructed as ambiguous, can contribute to the enhancement of intimacy in teenagers' romantic relationships.

4.1 Introduction

In academic research about teenagers' social media use, romantic intimacy is hardly a topic of interest, and empirical studies about this topic are scarce (exceptions being Pascoe 2010; Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015). This trend may be related to a history of adolescent romantic relationships not being taken seriously (Collins, Welsh, and Furman 2009) as well as to present-day rhetorics about digitally mediated forms of intimacy 'not being real' (Baym 2010, 29-30) or 'not really counting' (McGlotten 2013, 7). Theoretical reflections on the potential impact of social media on intimate relations predict a 'crisis of intimacy' (Chambers 2017) that will leave us 'alone together' (Turkle 2011). In her highly influential work, Turkle (2011) warns that under siege of thousands of digital messages, communication

becomes depersonalised, causing people to treat online friends the same way as they treat objects: hastily and without much attention or care (2011, 168). Quantitative research has pointed out correlations between social media use and social isolation (e.g. Primack et al. 2017), and although studies like these do not provide conclusions about the directionality of the correlation, they are quoted in popular debates to argue that social media isolate people from each other and annihilate intimate relations.

In this chapter, I aim to nuance this discourse that I would label as 'intimacy panics', by exploring how teenagers use social media to enhance intimacy within their romantic relationships. More specifically, I will explore how teenagers perceive and navigate social media's chances and challenges in relation to two highly common, digitally mediated romantic practices: conducting 'intensive conversations' and publicly displaying love. I will explore how teenagers navigate and construct the perceived affordances and public/private qualities of different spaces, and how this is related to possibilities for creating intimacy.

4.2 Digitally mediated romantic intimacy

Discourses of intimacy have been applied to describe a variety of relationships, including romantic relationships, friendships, and family ties (Chambers 2013; Attwood, Hakim, and Winch 2017; Chambers 2017). The concept of intimacy is generally used to refer to feelings of 'closeness' and 'belonging' (Mashek and Aron 2004; Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2011; McGlotten 2013; Miller 2013), or to 'affective' connections that 'impact on people' (Berlant 1998; Paasonen forthcoming). In his more concrete definition, Rowland Miller (2013, 2-4) describes six elements that characterise intimate relationships between two people. The first of these is extensive personal knowledge: intimate partners have extensive personal knowledge about each other (see also Giddens 1992). The second element is care and affection: partners care about each other and feel more affection for one another than they do for most others. The third element is interdependence: partners are interdependent and one partner's actions affect the other partner (see also Rusbult et al. 2004). The fourth is mutuality: partners regard themselves as a couple ('us') rather than two entirely separate individuals (see also Aron, Mashek, and Aron 2004). The fifth element that characterises intimate relationships is trust: partners trust each other to a high degree, and expect each other to be responsive to their needs and not to harm them (see also Collins and Feeney 2004; Reis, Clark, and Holmes 2004). The sixth and final element is commitment: partners expect the relationship

to continue indefinitely and invest time, effort and resources to safeguard this (see also Jamieson 1999). Miller's definition of intimacy is helpful in distinguishing different aspects of intimacy that may be influenced through social media.

Several researchers have argued that creating intimacy is (considered as) more complex in a digital context. Baym (2010, 30) for instance describes the commonplace argument that computer mediated communication lacks the social cues that provide rich meaning to a conversation, such as hearing somebody's voice and seeing a person's face (e.g. Krotz 2014). To some extent Baym agrees with this argument, admitting that 'nothing can replace a warm hug' (2010, 57). On the other hand, says Baym (2010, 56-7), people usually come up with creative ways of working around any communication barriers. Therefore, she proposes to think of digital communication as a 'mixed modality' that combines elements of different communication practices (2010, 63-6). Instead of taking face to face communication as the norm and concluding that digital communication is 'impoverished' or 'lacking' something, the mixed modality approach sees digital communication as a form of communication in its own right, in which new and existing practices are blended in order to communicate a certain message.

This approach has inspired a line of research about social media's impact on a variety of intimate practices and relationships. Most of these focused on non-romantic types of intimacy, with studies exploring themes such as politics, identity, friendship, family relations, activism, empowerment, exploitation and work relations (e.g. Doorn 2009; Hjorth and Lim 2012; Lambert 2013; McGlotten 2013; Attwood, Hakim, and Winch 2017). Research about intimacy in the context of romantic relationships is scarce, although some researchers have analysed how (young) adults use social media for hooking up (Albury and Byron 2016) and breaking up (Gershon 2010). These studies suggest that rather than being a destructive force, social media can contribute to intimate practices and relations.

Studies about teenagers' digitally mediated intimate practices similarly focus on non-romantic intimate relations such as friendship and family ties (e.g. Donath and boyd 2004; boyd 2008b; Livingstone 2008; Ito et al. 2010; boyd 2014; Chambers 2017), or on sexual practices such as 'sexting' (e.g. Graaf et al. 2012; Mitchell et al. 2012; Ringrose et al. 2012; Lenhart 2013; Harvey and Ringrose 2015) or sexual identity (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes 2004), especially in relation to queer young people (Pullen and Cooper 2010; Pullen 2014). De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2013) analysed how Belgian teenagers negotiate gender and sexuality by commenting on profile pictures. Even though they do mention the digitally mediated performance

of romantic coupledom (2013, 578-9), they explore how such performances reproduce heteronormativity, rather than what they mean to young people in terms of romantic intimacy.

Two other studies that explored teenagers' experiences with social media and romantic relationships are Pascoe's qualitative study (2010) and a mixed methods study by the Pew Research Center (Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015). These studies documented how US teenagers use social media to build and end romantic relationships. The study conducted by Lenhart, Anderson and Smith (2015) provides statistics showing that teenagers in the United States enthusiastically use social media for performing their romantic relationships. The study points out that while most teen romantic relationships do not start online, teenagers do use social media for flirting and for connecting logistically and emotionally with romantic partners, even though social media use may also feed jealousy and controlling behaviours, as well as concerns among teens about the 'publicness' of their interactions. The qualitative study conducted by Pascoe (2010) adds to this knowledge by describing how teenagers use social media in different phases of their romantic relationships to meet, flirt, date, and break up with each other, which is linked by Pascoe to the themes of privacy (mainly interpreted as privacy vis-à-vis parents), monitoring (of significant others) and vulnerability (especially in terms of emotional exposure, but also in terms of fears regarding unwanted sexual solicitations).

The aim of the present study is to study in more detail the link between teenagers' digitally mediated romantic practices and the performance of intimacy. Rather than providing a complete overview of young people's digitally mediated romantic practices like in the studies conducted by Lenhart, Anderson and Smith (2015) and Pascoe (2010), I zoom in on two practices that were highly prevalent among research participants, namely conducting 'intensive conversations' and publicly displaying love, and explore how these are related to the performance of romantic intimacy, using Miller's comprehensive definition of intimacy (2013).

Several researchers have pointed out that intimacy is traditionally associated with the inner realm of the 'private' sphere such as the house (Berlant 1998; Plummer 2003; Reynolds 2010; Hjorth and Lim 2012; Chambers 2013; Wyss 2014; Chambers 2017). This association between intimacy and the private sphere has been challenged however by researchers building on decades of feminist critiques of the public/private dichotomy (see for example Pateman 1989 [1983]). These researchers have argued that intimacy is not necessarily limited to the 'private' sphere, if such a separate sphere even exists, and that 'public' norms, practices and institutions influence 'private' intimate practices (Plummer 1995; Berlant 1998; Berlant

and Warner 1998; Schwartz and Rutter 1998; James 2006; Pascoe 2010; Reynolds 2010; Hjorth and Lim 2012). Focusing specifically on teenagers' romantic intimate practices, Pascoe (2010, 129-32) observes for instance how young people demonstrate affection for their romantic partner not only 'in private', but also 'in public', for example through comments on each other's online posts. Social media and mobile phones may thus contribute to the conceptualisation and practicing of intimacy as a component of the 'public' rather than the 'private' sphere (Hjorth and Lim 2012). The present analysis of young people's performances of intimacy can be positioned within this strand of research that critically investigates the role of both 'public' and 'private' spaces in intimate practices. Moreover, it takes the analysis one step further by demonstrating how young people actively construct spaces as either public or private through their romantic intimate practices, and how this constructed public or private quality of social media spaces may in turn contribute to a construction of their practices as intimate.

4.3 Methods

This chapter is based on one-and-a-half years of 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, 28 individual and duo-interviews, 2 group interviews and 6 focus group meetings[34] with young people. Offline participant observation took place in schools, public transport (e.g. the bus between the train station and the school) 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.

[34] Two focus group meetings and one group interview were conducted by the author together with Master's students, who used the data as part of their MA theses. These focus group meetings were chaired by MA students: one by Queeny Eugenia and one by Marjoke Tiems. The group interview was chaired by the author, together with two Master's students – Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée. All other focus group meetings and interviews were conducted and chaired by the author.

After one year of fieldwork, I developed a survey to analyse how common some of the activities and patterns were.[35] The survey was an extension to previous surveys in the Netherlands about youth, sexuality and social media (Graaf and Vanwesenbeeck 2006; Walle and Graaf 2010; Graaf et al. 2012), in the sense that it included a broader range of activities and mapped in more detail which practices young people undertake in which online spaces 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 were diverse 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 being native 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. approaching summer holidays) and to the topic of the survey, that was sometimes considered as 'too sensitive' (see also Leurs 2012). In addition, diversity in terms of sexual preferences, practices and identifications was not very extensive: the majority of these survey respondents identified as heterosexual. This was corrected by recruiting the other half of the survey participants via an online community for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people. The survey thus reports about a wealth of experiences, but the quantitative analyses are not representative and should be regarded as indicative. Merging qualitative and quantitative information contributed to a more complete understanding of young people's digitally mediated sexual practices (Creswell 2008). In this chapter, all research participants have been anonymised.

4.4 Starting a romantic relationship

Both the quantitative and the qualitative results of my study show that romantic relationships play a major role in teenagers' lives. Of all survey

[35] The survey was conducted by the author with the help of two Master's students: Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée.

respondents, 74% had ever been in a romantic relationship. Of these respondents, 73% had met their most recent partner offline, for example at school or at a party, and 62% said that the first conversation with their partner took place offline, which indicates that offline spaces still play a major role in young people's relationships, for example for meeting and starting a conversation with a (potential) partner. This is consistent with US findings indicating that 76% of all teens with dating experience had only dated people whom they had met offline (Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015).[36]

The use of online spaces for meeting (potential) partners was especially mentioned by research participants who were socially marginalised (see also Holloway and Valentine 2003, Driver 2007, Pascoe 2010, Szulc and Dhoest 2013), such as queer young people, young people with a low social status within their peer group, or shy young people who find it 'scary' or 'difficult' to talk with peers offline. Social media offer additional opportunities for these young people to meet potential romantic partners, because they afford contact with more and/or other peers than offline (e.g. peers identifying as queer), and offer possibilities to (temporarily) hide physical or social characteristics that are socially marked as 'undesirable' as well as physical signs of discomfort. Nevertheless, also relationships that started online are usually complemented with offline contact at some point in time, and also for research participants in marginalised positions, offline spaces played an important role in their love stories.

While most research participants met their partner offline, social media often played a crucial role in following up on these initial offline contacts. For example, 77% of all survey respondents with relationship experience had 'talked' with their (potential) partner via social media such as WhatsApp or Facebook to get to know them better. For them, as for most other research participants, offline interaction was combined with online interaction in the establishment of a romantic relationship (see also Pascoe 2010; Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015). In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore in more detail how teenagers navigate chances and challenges of social media with regard to two practices that were highly prevalent in my research data about teens' romantic relationships: (1) conducting intensive private conversations and (2) publicly displaying love and relationships.

[36] Although in this US sample, a much smaller share of participants, 35%, had relationship experience.

4.5 Intensive conversations

Chances

One of the ways in which research participants used social media in their romantic relationships was by conducting intensive one-on-one ('private') 'conversations' with their (potential) romantic partner via media such as WhatsApp. Of all survey respondents with relationship experience (n=465), 77% had used social media to 'talk' with their most recent crush and get to know them better. Also later in relationships, talking with a romantic partner online remains a common practice (see also Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015, 32-3). Social media provide additional opportunities for these conversations to become rather intensive.

Conversations can become intensive in the sense that they completely 'absorb' conversation partners. During a class where I conducted participant observation, one of the pupils, Jasmine (14), was texting with her boyfriend via WhatsApp, taking pictures of herself in different poses (e.g. pouting her lips as to symbolise a kiss) and sending these to him. When she found out I was observing her, it looked like she 'woke up'; she changed posture, put away her phone and looked a little embarrassed about me 'catching' her. Even though Jasmine was physically present in the classroom, she had become so involved in the conversation that she seemed to have forgotten about her surroundings and became absorbed into the private space that she and her boyfriend had created via WhatsApp. Jasmine's reaction to me observing her emphasises that for her, the conversation felt private, even though she was physically present in the public sphere of the classroom. Social media thus not only allowed Jasmine to 'talk' with her boyfriend in spite of geographical distance between them; it also offered her a chance to talk with him *in private* while other people were sitting right next to her, which would have been impossible in an offline face to face conversation or phone call.

This opportunity for creating privacy is especially useful for young people in secret and/or marginalised relationships, such as same-sex relationships. For these young people, it is more difficult to perform their relationship in public, because of the risk of social disapproval. Private social media spaces provide them with opportunities to still have intensive conversations with lovers, even if they are physically present in (semi-)public spaces such as their home or their school (see also Pascoe 2010; Naezer 2015b).

Conversations can also be intensive in that they are lengthy and/or consist of a high number of messages. For example, a single WhatsApp conversation between research participant Nadine (14) and her potential partner Lucas consisted of over 700 messages, exchanged within 7 hours, between 5 pm

and midnight. In the meantime, the two continued their other activities such as dinner, sports training, homework, downloading of a game and watching television. During an interview, Kamal (13) explains about a six-hour Skype conversation with his friend Roos:

Kamal:	We just talked about all kinds of things. And in the meantime I did some other things.
Marijke:	What were you doing in the meantime?
Kamal:	I was gaming. And at one point, I had to do my work-out.
Marijke:	And you left the Skype connection open during your work-out?
Kamal:	Yes, but I switched off the camera. I put my mobile on the floor, so we could continue talking.
Marijke:	And Roos was also doing something else?
Kamal:	Yes, she was with a friend of hers. They were talking with each other.
Marijke:	And with you as well?
Kamal:	Yes, sometimes with each other, sometimes with me. But I could hear everything they said; it was not as if they were whispering.

These cases show how much time and effort are invested in digitally mediated conversations, and how they continue even when conversation partners have other obligations. Such investments are supported by social media that allow young people to exchange text messages or conduct video calls 'for free',[37] and by mobile phones with Internet access (owned by 99% of our survey respondents) that allow for these conversations to be conducted 'anytime, anywhere' (Watkins 2009).

During these conversations, participants create 'private' spaces while being physically present in more 'public' spaces such as school or a sports club, building the 'connected presence' (Licoppe 2004) that was also recounted by Pascoe (2010). Also within these private spaces, privacy is constantly negotiated, as was shown by Kamal switching off his camera at one point. Moreover, access to (potentially) romantic private spaces is not always limited to (potential) lovers, as Kamal's case demonstrates, and conversations may become more 'public' when other people are being involved. The challenges of this potential publicness will be discussed later. For now, my point is that social media afford intensive 'private' conversations and enable conversation partners to create 'private' spaces within more public spaces.

[37] Although some teenagers had to pay for their computer, smartphone, and/or Internet access themselves.

A slightly different example of an intensive conversation is that of Kyra (15) and Mark (17), who were in a long-distance relationship and said about their Skype conversations: 'If there is a good Internet connection, you really feel like: I'm *talking* to him' (Kyra). Mark adds: 'You're talking for fifteen minutes and you hardly notice that there is a distance.' A conversation as described by Kyra and Mark is similar to a face-to-face conversation, in that 'participants cooperate to maintain focused interaction' (Rettie 2009, 425-6), making it into a shared, mutual event. This also links up with young people referring to digitally mediated conversations with 'offline words' such as 'talking' and 'conversations'. The cases discussed here differ in terms of how 'focused' the interactions are, but they all demonstrate the construction of a shared space in which participants are 'together' or 'co-present' for an extended period of time.

Intensive conversations can concern 'intimate topics' such as sexuality. Nadine and Lucas discussed in their WhatsApp conversation at what age they had had their first kiss and their first sexual intercourse, as well as the social norms surrounding these practices. They also gave each other compliments about their looks, discussed whether they should go on a date and what might happen on such a potential date (hugging, kissing and 'maybe more'). Conversations such as these can be experienced as being 'easier' online than offline because of the 'absence' of bodies (see also Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015, 26-7).[38] This brings challenges as will be discussed in the next section, but also allows young people to hide visual and auditory clues of feeling 'awkward' and thereby enables them to discuss 'sensitive' topics. This may be especially useful for young people who find it difficult to talk about such topics offline.

For a considerable share of research participants (38% of all survey respondents with relationship experience), sex was not only a *topic* of digitally mediated conversations, but also a *practice*. This is what is called 'sexting' or 'cybersex' by adults. In the survey, it was described as 'sexual conversations' that involved for example 'posing sexual questions, exchanging sexy pictures, or making sexually provocative remarks.' Of all survey respondents with sexting experience, 33% indicated that their most recent sexting experience had also included one or both partners revealing nude buttocks, breasts, or genitals. In such sexting encounters, the 'absence

[38] Even though the physical bodies of users are always involved in digitally mediated practices (Sundén 2003, 5; boyd 2008a, 126; Tuszynski 2008), 'online, there are no bodies in the corporeal sense, obscuring both identity information that is typically written on the body and presence information that makes a person visible to others' (boyd 2008a, 121).

of bodies' may be seen as an obstacle that has to be overcome, as will be elaborated on in the next section, but it can also be regarded as a positive factor that enhances sexual arousal, says Femke (18):

> That the other person says: I miss you, or I think about you, or I get turned on, and that you say something like: I can't be with you right now, but here's a picture of me; that's all I can do for you at this moment. [...] You're not together, but you can still be aroused, and it's nice to use that for teasing the other.

Femke thus uses the 'absence' of bodies for building sexual tension and arousal.

Next to the 'absence' of bodies, also another affordance of social media plays an important role in such conversations, namely the opportunity to readily share online content. Sending somebody personal information and 'sexy' material brings the risk of this content being shared with a large audience. Because of this risk, young people are often advised not to engage in such practices (see also chapter 3). This ignores however that if both partners decide to keep the information to themselves, the conversation contributes to mutual trust, which is one of the elements of intimacy as defined by Miller (2013). Sharing personal, 'sensitive' and 'sexy' information and material can thus play a crucial role in the performance of romantic intimacy, precisely *because of* the risks of this information or material being shared with a larger audience (see chapter 3 for more reflection on risk as a potentially positive force).

Finally, social media are helpful in affording ambiguity, as is illustrated by the WhatsApp conversation between Nadine and Lucas. Their conversation starts, after a 'hey x',[39] with Lucas referring to Nadine's recent break-up with Julian:

> Lucas: So now I have a chance again, hihi
> [A series of messages follows in which Lucas and Nadine share details about their sexual history. Contrary to Nadine, Lucas does not have any experience with sexual intercourse]
> Lucas: [Maybe that's because] I'm not as attractive as Julian xd[40]
> [...]
> Nadine: You look good, you'll be all right ;p[41]

[39] The x represents a kiss. It is often used to express love, but it can also be used to express friendship.

[40] The xd refers to an emoticon that laughs so hard that it squeezes its eyes.

[41] The ;p refers to an emoticon that winks and shows its tongue.

Lucas: Ok, then come to my house
Lucas: Hahaha, just kidding ;p
Nadine: Hahaha ;p
[...]
Lucas: You look good too x
[...]
Lucas: By the way, you really have a great picture, haha

One of the things that stands out in this conversation is the high number of words like 'haha' and emoticons such as winking smileys. This type of language can be employed to politely avoid answering a question, like Nadine does when Lucas asks her to come over to his house and she only says 'haha'. It can also be employed to make a remark or an invitation more ambiguous and thereby 'safe', which Lucas does for example when he suggests that he might have a chance with her, 'hihi'. Had she been negative about his move, he could have said that it was only a joke, thereby saving him from losing face (see also Pascoe 2010; Chambers 2013). The same can be said about the use of the 'x' by both Nadine and Lucas, which represents a kiss that can be exchanged between sexual/romantic partners, but also between friends, making it into an ambiguous sign that can be used to carefully express affection and thereby enhance the level of intimacy between two people.

This strategic use of ambiguity is afforded not only by the 'absence' of bodies, but also by the asynchronous nature of text messaging that allows conversation partners to carefully compose 'casual' messages, which may be called 'controlled casualness' (Sims in Pascoe (2010, 22)). Even though such delays cannot be stretched too long, because that is interpreted by research participants as a sign that their partner 'ignores' them,[42] the asynchronous character of digitally mediated textual conversations affords the creation of ambiguous messages which may contribute to the enhancement of romantic intimacy between (potential) partners.

The examples discussed in this section demonstrate that intensive conversations can contribute to several elements of intimacy as defined by Miller (2013): they enable young people to exchange personal knowledge about themselves, not only by talking about themselves, but also more indirectly by involving a significant other in daily activities such as sports trainings or meetings with friends, which provides a conversation partner

[42] This disapproval of delays is consistent with the trend of young people's text-messaging becoming increasingly dialogic (Kasesniemi and Rautiainen 2002; Thurlow and Brown 2003; Pascoe 2010; Chambers 2013).

with information about hobbies and interests, daily schedules, social networks, and communication style. Moreover, intensive conversations allow young people to exchange tokens of care and affection, which may be explicit (e.g. a picture of a kiss) or implicit (the amount of time that is invested and the number of messages that are exchanged). Intensive conversations also enact commitment: the investment of effort to safeguard the future of the relationship. Finally, the conversations may build mutuality (a sense of being part of a couple), as well as trust that the other partner will be responsive to one's needs and not do anything harmful, such as sharing personal information and sexy material with other people. Indeed, in the study conducted by Lenhart and colleagues (2015, 39), 70% of dating teens indicated feeling 'closer' to a significant other because of digitally mediated conversations.

Challenges

The 'absence' of bodies that brings specific chances for establishing intimacy also comes with challenges. In this section, I will discuss four challenges. First, it may be harder online than offline to check whether a conversation partner speaks truthfully, because of the lack of visual clues (see also Krotz 2014). If research participants had doubts about their conversation partner speaking truthfully, they often solved this by using a webcam: 'With a webcam you can see another person's intentions, how he looks at you, what he is doing, if he is alone or with friends, if he's messing around with you' (Didem, 15). For Didem, visual clues were important in her digitally mediated conversations with boys, to check whether they came across as sincere, or were just 'messing around' with her. Therefore, she always used a webcam in her digitally mediated conversations with boys.

In the case of Kyra and Mark, who met on *Chatlokaal* and developed a romantic relationship, Kyra used multiple strategies to check whether Mark was speaking truthfully. She analysed Mark's online profiles, asked him to send pictures of himself, checked those pictures via Google,[43] and finally used Skype conversations (with a webcam) to confirm that Mark was indeed the boy he said he was. While adults often warn young people about using a webcam, for young people it may actually function as a tool to eliminate doubts about a conversation partner speaking truthfully.

[43] Google has included an option to search for images. One can upload a picture and see in what other online spaces it has been used. This option is used amongst others by youngsters (and adults) to check whether pictures they received from somebody are not somebody else's pictures, which would raise questions about his/her trustworthiness.

Second, the lack of visual clues in textual messages makes it harder to interpret another person's actions, which may lead to misunderstandings (see also Krotz 2014). Several research participants had been in arguments with their romantic partners because of such miscommunications. To some extent, textual messages can be clarified by 'quasi-nonverbal cues' such as emoticons, which may improve the receiver's perception and interpretation of the message (Derks, Bos, and von Grumbkow 2008; Lo 2008). However, not all research participants agreed on the importance and effectiveness of emoticons, and several participants stated that they do not use them very much, because it is 'too much of an effort' or because that is 'something adults do'. Because of the misunderstandings that can arise from the lack of visual clues in text messages, some research participants preferred using a medium that has webcam facilities and affords real time, face-to-face communication, such as Skype or Facetime[44], or chose offline face-to-face contact, to prevent intimate romantic conversations ending up in arguments or even break-ups.

A third challenge, that was brought up especially in discussions about sexy pictures, was the potential access of other people to the conversation (see also Krotz 2014). With social media affording content to be shared on a large scale within a short period of time, research participants expressed worries about conversation partners showing or even forwarding their pictures to other people, and making a private conversation public. This is also a hot topic in popular debates about social media, and young people, especially girls, are often warned not to share sexy pictures: almost half of all survey respondents had heard this warning more than ten times, whereas only 8,5% had never heard it. The rather extreme measures that are advised by adults however, such as not providing personal or sexual information/materials to other people online, limit young people's opportunities for establishing intimacy with romantic partners. If teenagers provide personal information and their partners keep it to themselves, this contributes to the enhancement of intimacy, as was argued in the previous section.

Although the issue of limiting access to a conversation came to the fore mostly in discussions about sexy pictures, it was also brought up in relation to more general conversations with a romantic partner, and conversation partners sometimes even asked each other explicitly not to share the conversation with other people. Nevertheless, conversations were sometimes shared with a friend (of all survey respondents with relationship experience, 50% had done this 'sometimes' and 14% did this regularly), for example to get advice on how to interpret or respond to a certain message

[44] Facetime is the 'Apple version' of Skype, which is a Microsoft product.

from a romantic partner. I even observed friends typing messages together, without informing their conversation partner about this. Even though such an involvement of friends in digitally mediated conversations between romantic partners may be helpful for one partner, the other partner may experience it as a breach of trust, especially when they explicitly asked not to share it.

A fourth challenge that is related to intensive conversations is the lack of control over a conversations partner's involvement. Familiar visual clues used to determine whether one has the undivided attention of an offline conversation partner (eye contact, body language) are missing in digitally mediated conversations, especially in typed conversations (see also Krotz 2014). The difficulty here is not so much in the lack of *knowledge* about whether the conversation partner is involved however, as Krotz (2014) suggests. Research participants' stories and practices reveal that they have already developed several indicators to judge a conversation partner's involvement, such as a partner's typing speed, the length of the conversation and content of the messages. The lack of control has to do more with the limited possibilities for *changing* a partner's involvement. Offline strategies such as raising one's voice or touching a conversation partner are impossible in digitally mediated conversations, and several research participants recounted stories about being frustrated about partners who 'ignored' them and did not meet their standards in terms of speed, number and content of messages (see also Pascoe 2010; Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015).

4.6 Public display of love

Chances

A second digitally mediated practice that plays a role in teenagers' romantic relationships is the online 'public' display of love and relationships. The public display of love and relationships is not new, and young people, at least those in normative relationships, have always been involved in practices such as holding hands, kissing, sitting on each other's lap, and wearing jewellery that symbolises a relationship, such as rings, necklaces and bracelets. Social media however provide users with additional chances for publicly displaying love.

Popular social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram afford the integration of different types of information about users' relationship statuses. On Facebook, a relationship can be mentioned

via the 'relationship status' option,[45] but it was more common for research participants to integrate their romantic partner in an online profile in other ways: by using their partner's picture as background or profile picture, or by mentioning their partner's name and/or their anniversary date in biographies[46] ('Love my baby @[name]'; 'Taken by [name] ლ '040913' love him so much♥'; 'love my boyfriend'). Of all survey respondents with relationship experience (n=465), 40% had used these affordances to integrate their most recent partner in their online profile(s). Sometimes, lovers wrote statements about and/or messages to their partner in their partner's biography, thereby integrating themselves in their partner's profile. An example of the latter is Lana's WhatsApp biography, where her girlfriend has written: 'Staying with you forever is absolutely my biggest dream <3 [name]'♡.[47] Some couples even made a joint profile, although this is not very common: 8% of all survey respondents with relationship experience had made a joint profile together with their most recent partner. Next to profiles, also timelines are often filled with relationship information, in the form of (semi-)public declarations of love ('I love you @[name]'), updates about activities the couple has undertaken ('Had a great day today with @[name]), or anniversaries ('Today half a year with my baby [name]'). Contrary to many offline public displays of love, such as kissing and holding hands, these online displays of love are more persistent, in that they are visible at every moment of the day, and remain so for as long as the owner wants them to be.

Moreover, due to the networked quality of online publics (boyd 2014), the potential audience is bigger than offline. The (perceived) audience can vary from a few close friends/family members to a large group of 'followers' to 'everybody who happens to take a look on that specific account', which sets them apart from offline displays of affection. This public visibility does not necessarily mean that these messages should automatically be regarded as 'public' however. Sometimes, they specifically addressed a romantic partner, and some research participants reacted surprised or even annoyed when other people, like the author of this chapter, asked questions about those messages, implicating that they regarded them to be a 'private' matter. In these cases, public displays of love can be interpreted as the 'annexing' of public space

[45] The options provided by Facebook during my fieldwork (2013-2014) were: single, in a relationship, engaged, married, in an open relationship, it's complicated, we broke up, divorced, or widow(er).

[46] Several social media offer opportunities to say 'something' about oneself in a biography. This is used by young people in different ways, for example to inform others about hobbies, to include a quote, or to mention the names of friends.

[47] <3 represents a heart.

(Lambert 2013) to make that into a private space: by exchanging affection, public online spaces are given a more private quality.

On the other hand, displays of love were not always directed (only) at the romantic partner; sometimes, they were (also) directed at a more general audience. This is the case for instance in Fay's message on the Instagram page of her boyfriend, where she first addresses her boyfriend: 'please never leave me you mean the world to me baby you are perfect to me'. In the second part of the message, she talks *about* her boyfriend to a more general audience: 'my lovely boyfriend, I love *him* so much' [my emphasis]. The latter part of the message makes clear that Fay actually addresses a larger audience in expressing how much she loves her boyfriend. Apparently, the (semi-)public character of the pictures and messages is important, as is confirmed by Jamal (16) during an interview: 'It's a sense of pride; everybody may know that we are having a relationship!' This feeling of 'pride' and the sentiment that 'everybody may know' was expressed rather often by research participants who uploaded pictures and texts about their romantic partner.

Mark explains why public displays of affection are important: 'Otherwise it is as if the other is not important to you.' For Mark, publicly showing off his relationship is a way of making visible how much he loves his partner and how much the relationship means to him. Moreover, his girlfriend Kyra adds:

> It would be weird if I had this [relationship] information in my profile, and he hadn't. [...] Then it would be as if I say that I am in a relationship, but that this is not true. [...] Other people would think that it's not true.

Kyra finds it important to create a coherent image of the relationship for 'others', because otherwise those people may not take it seriously. For Kyra, other people's recognition is crucial for making her relationship feel serious, and the networked quality of social media allows her not only to inform her social network about the relationship, but also to encourage them to 'like' the relationship and give positive comments, thereby making their recognition more explicit and visible than they might be able or willing to do offline.

These findings demonstrate that young people's 'digital embodiments' of their relationships (Pascoe 2010) are not just a reflection of the 'offline reality'; they are also *performative* in that they enhance the level of intimacy between partners. They contribute to intimacy as defined by Miller (2013) in that they are an expression of and contribution to care and affection, interdependence (information on one partner's profile/timeline affects the other partner), mutuality (linked or even mutual profiles; excluding others

by signalling that a person is 'taken'), and commitment (investment of time, explicit and implicit remarks about staying together forever). The (semi-) public character of the activities is crucial in this process: the intimacy is not just created between two partners, but it is created with pride, in the presence of others who may comment on it (see also Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015), which adds weight to the activities and enhances interdependency between partners. Moreover, as Lambert (2013, 57) has also argued, the (semi-)public character of the activities helps to garner recognition from others, which makes a relationship more 'real' or 'serious'.

Challenges

Social media thus provide young people with chances for publicly displaying affection, but such performances of intimacy can also be challenging, because they require rather advanced technical knowledge about specific applications, as well as social skills in negotiating the online visibility of the relationship with a partner. During the interview with Kyra and Mark, it becomes clear how difficult this can be:

Marijke:	Did you integrate your relationship in your Facebook profile?
Kyra:	Yes
[...]	
Marijke (to Mark):	And you?
Mark:	...
Kyra (indignant):	No! He still has to accept my ... [invitation]
Mark (defensive):	I already did that! It says: 'is in a relationship'.
Kyra:	Yeah, but there's no name to it!

Mark seems to be unaware of the different ways in which a romantic relationship can be integrated into a Facebook profile. He did change his relationship status to indicate that he is 'in a relationship', but he did not 'tag' Kyra.[48] As a consequence, his profile mentions that he is in a relationship, but not that it concerns a relationship with Kyra ('there's no name to it'). While Mark is convinced that he has properly integrated the relationship in his profile, Kyra feels like he is not quick and complete enough, and interprets this as a lack of commitment.

[48] On Facebook, if one user 'tags' another user to indicate a romantic relationship, the other person receives an 'invitation' to accept this, meaning that the relationship information and the name of the partner will be added to both partners' profiles.

In Kyra and Mark's case, it was Mark's lack of technical knowledge about Facebook that seemed to be the most important cause of him performing the relationship 'the wrong way'. In other cases, the challenge may be in the negotiation of expectations with regard to the online visibility of the relationship. Some teenagers prefer to limit the amount of relationship information online, because they are worried about the 'drama' that could arise with many people asking questions about and commenting on a relationship; because they are not sure about the relationship status; because they do not want to 'brag'; or because they want to keep the relationship from the prying eyes of parents (see also Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015, 47-8). Other reasons that were mentioned by research participants were that relationship issues are 'private things'; that they did not want to hurt their ex-partner by showing off their new relationship; or that they were afraid of being condemned for having a relationship. These can all be reasons not to show off a relationship online, even though this may hurt the relationship.

Some research participants found creative ways to solve this problem of negotiating the 'level of publicness' of public displays of love. An (16) for instance explained during a focus group how she 'always thinks twice' before she posts information on Facebook, because of the church members that are 'present' there. On Twitter however, she shares much more information, because church members can't find her there. This is not a matter of active exclusion, she argues, but her abstract, unrecognisable Twitter name does work as a 'filter' that limits the access of certain [religious, adult] audiences to her online activities. Choosing such an abstract name allows young people like An to manage the level of publicness of their online displays of affection, and to increase their possibilities for publicly displaying romantic affection.

4.7 Sexual norms

While academic and popular debates often focus on the technological challenges of digitally mediated intimacy, my research data demonstrate that gendered, heteronormative, racialised, classed and religious sexual norms constitute a challenge that is at least as important. These norms have been studied extensively, both in offline and online contexts, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss these norms in depth, or to elaborate on the ways in which young people navigate them (see for instance chapter 5). I will discuss two cases though, that demonstrate how sexual norms can make it extremely difficult for teenagers to engage in digitally mediated intimate practices.

The first case concerns intensive conversations. Throughout the intensive WhatsApp conversation between Nadine and Lucas, Lucas is clearly trying to hit on Nadine, but she avoids his hints and explains:

Nadine:	[...] I just broke up, you know
[...]	
Lucas:	And then Julian [Nadine's ex-boyfriend, MN] will get certain ideas about you.
Lucas:	That you are already dating someone else and stuff
Nadine:	Yeah, exactly
Nadine:	I don't want to be known as a whore you know haha
Lucas:	Yeah, indeed

Nadine is reluctant to flirt with Lucas (both online and offline), because she is afraid that others might find her a 'whore' for getting into a new relationship 'too soon', a fear that Lucas seems to confirm as being realistic. The norm of being sexually 'modest' that is still very present in western societies (e.g. Naezer 2006; Attwood 2007; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Ringrose 2011; Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011; Bailey et al. 2013; Lippman and Campbell 2014; Lasén 2015) is an obstacle that hinders Nadine in developing intimacy with Lucas both online and offline. The risk of slut-shaming is even bigger in relation to online intimate conversations, because these can be saved and shared with a large audience.

The second case concerns the role of gendered and heteronormative norms with regard to public displays of affection. Several girls in my study were reluctant to publicly display love, afraid of being labelled as a 'slut', while boys were sometimes hesitant to do this out of fear of being called 'gay': acting 'romantic', at least in public, was often labelled as unmasculine ('feminine', 'gay'). Some research participants referred to their ethnic background and/or religion to explain why they could not engage in intimate practices: '[I didn't post information online about my relationship] because I did not want my family to see it. I was a little embarrassed about it, because messing around with girls is not part of our culture', says Selim (17), referring to his Turkish background. Sexual norms can thus be a serious obstacle for young people who want to use social media for building intimate romantic relationships through public displays of love.

Especially certain types of relationships are vulnerable to being condemned, namely same-sex relationships, socially mixed relationships (e.g. ethnically mixed, interreligious, mixed-age, mixed-class and mixed-popularity), and Internet-based relationships. Some research participants who were in such a non-normative relationship did decide to publicly

display their relationship online, which resulted in positive comments, but also in negative comments and even bullying. This is consistent with research showing that young people in marginalised relationships often experience social disapproval as a result of their union, both offline and online. They are less likely to receive support from their social network and society in general, and more likely to encounter negative reactions when appearing in public (Lehmiller and Agnew 2006, 41; McGlotten 2013; Payne and Smith 2013).

For some research participants, this was a reason for not showing their relationship online, afraid of negative reactions (see also Ringrose 2011). For example, Connor (18) says about his relationship with a boy: 'I was not "out", so I had to hide my relationship, also on social media.' Mandy (14) made a similar choice:

> My father got mad once about me posting a tweet that I was in love. If this were about a [white] Dutch boy, it would have been fine with him, but I'm not attracted to [white] Dutch boys. [...] So now I only use WhatsApp to talk with boys.

Both Connor and Mandy felt like they could not publicly display love, because others rejected their relationship. Their experiences confirm that online spaces can exclude people, or 'make people want to exclude themselves' if their needs and expectations do not fit the dominant norms of these spaces (Plate and Rommes 2007, 34-5). The high visibility of normative relationships on mainstream social media, together with the exclusion of non-normative relationships, reinforces the marginalisation of young people in non-normative relationships.

4.8 Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter contradict apocalyptic analyses of social media destroying intimacy. Instead, teenagers actively navigate the perceived chances and challenges afforded by social media, in addition to offline communication, in order to create, enhance and protect intimacy in their romantic relationships. Practices such as conducting intensive conversations and publicly displaying love show that in many ways, digitally mediated communication is not that 'fundamentally different' from offline face-to-face communication. Teenagers' digitally mediated romantic practices are similar to offline face-to-face practices for instance in terms of the activities that are undertaken (e.g. making flirtatious remarks, exchanging

tokens of affection, engaging in small talk, having sex), the feelings that are involved (e.g. love, insecurity), and the social conventions and norms that play a role (e.g. gendered and heteronormative sexual norms).

On the other hand, social media offer specific chances for building intimacy in ways that are unavailable offline. First, conversations via media such as WhatsApp and Skype/Facetime are free of charge and they can take place anytime, anywhere, regardless of factors such as geographical distance, presence of other people (e.g. classmates, parents, people who reject the relationship), or other obligations (e.g. sports, homework, sleep). This enables teenagers to get 'absorbed' into lengthy, more or less 'private' intensive conversations that create a feeling of connected presence. Moreover, the 'absence' of bodies is interpreted as a chance to hide uncertainty or discomfort, which can make a digitally mediated conversation feel 'easier' than offline; as a chance for teasing a partner to make a conversation feel 'sexy' in a way that is not possible offline; or as a chance to create ambiguity, especially in the case of asynchronous, textual communication, which can be helpful to young people for example in the flirting process.

Intensive conversations can contribute to several of the aspects of intimacy as defined by Miller (2013). They can make conversation partners more knowledgeable about each other, not just directly, but also more indirectly, since 'hanging out', sometimes together with friends, provides teenagers with insight into their partner's hobbies, interests, daily schedule, social network and communication style. Second, intensive conversations are used to exchange care and affection both explicitly, through affectionate texts and pictures, and implicitly, through the investment of time and energy. Such investments, aimed at securing the future of the relationship, also contribute to a third aspect of intimacy: commitment. Fourth, intensive conversations can strengthen the idea that conversation partners are a team or a couple, rather than two separate individuals, which is called mutuality by Miller. Finally, intensive conversations, especially 'sexy conversations', demand and produce high levels of trust, which is a fifth element of intimacy.

Social media also provide teenagers with several chances to integrate a significant other into an online profile: by adjusting 'relationship status', including a picture of their partner in their profile, mentioning a partner and/or the relationship in their biography or having their partner write something in their biography, making a joint profile, or by posting declarations of love and updates about the relationship in their timelines. Teenagers use these chances to publicly perform their romantic relationship, together with online 'friends' and 'followers'. Also these public displays of love and affection can

contribute to intimacy as defined by Miller (2013). To some extent, this is similar to intensive conversations. For instance, like intensive conversations, public displays of love confirm and enact care, affection and commitment. In terms of mutuality, public displays of love may be even more powerful than intensive conversations, because of the opportunity to create connected or even mutual online profiles that perform coupledom, as well as the opportunity to exclude others by signalling that the partner is 'taken'. Finally, public displays of love have a major impact in terms of interdependence, as information on one partner's profile/timeline directly affects the other partner. Intensive conversations and public displays of love thus contribute in their own ways to the six different elements of intimacy distinguished by Miller (2013).

Young people's options to profit from the chances afforded by social media are influenced by several challenges: the complexities of new technologies and new social norms about how to use these media; potential problems caused by the 'absence' of bodies; and restrictive social norms about sexuality. For instance, girls may feel reluctant to engage in intensive private conversations out of fear for being labelled as a 'slut', and teenagers who are involved in non-normative relations may not dare to publicly display their love in anticipation of potential negative reactions. While social media may thus on the one hand reduce social inequalities by offering young people the opportunity to perform non-normative practices and relationships in private, they also reinforce social inequalities by making normative groups and relationships more visible and non-normative groups and relationships more invisible.

Opportunities for creating intimacy are also closely related to the perceived private or public character of online spaces. My analysis confirms previous research in demonstrating how intimacy is performed both 'in private' and 'in public', and it extends this research by arguing that the 'public' or 'private' character of social media spaces is co-constructed in interaction with young people's intimate practices. For instance, research participants generally associate intensive conversations with the private sphere, and they conduct these conversations via media that are perceived as 'private', such as WhatsApp. In this process, the private quality of the medium and the intimate quality of the conversation are co-constructed: having an intensive conversation via WhatsApp constructs WhatsApp as private, and using WhatsApp for an intensive conversation contributes to the construction of that conversation as intimate.

Intimacy is not limited to private spaces however, as was demonstrated by research participants' (semi-)public displays of affection. To some extent, such (semi-)public performances of intimacy may be interpreted as an

'annexation' of public spaces, through which those spaces get a more 'private' quality. On the other hand, the perceived public character of certain spaces may actually be crucial for their potential with regard to building intimacy, especially for teenagers in normative relationships. The idea that 'everybody may see it' adds weight to declarations of love and the 'likes' and comments of others can confirm a relationship and make it more 'real'. These 'public intimacies' show that intimacy is not confined to spaces that are typically regarded as private, as is so often asserted in dominant discourses about intimacy. To the contrary: both spaces that are constructed as private and spaces that are constructed as public, as well as spaces that are constructed as ambiguous, can contribute to the enhancement of intimacy in teenagers' romantic relationships.

Chapter 5

Sexy selves

Girls, selfies and the performance of intersectional identities

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Chapter 5

Sexy selves

Girls, selfies and the performance of intersectional identities

Abstract

Present-day discourses about teen girls' sexy selfies are contradictory, and sexiness is both encouraged and condemned. Feminist sociologists and cultural media studies scholars have demonstrated that girls navigate sexiness in ways that both challenge and reinforce these discourses, and that their navigations are interwoven with the performance of gender and sexuality. In this article, which is based on one and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch young people, I contribute to and extend this strand of research by exploring how girls' navigations of sexiness are related to the performance of not just gender and sexuality, but also other intersecting axes of social differentiation, including axes that have remained undertheorised such as smartness, maturity and popularity. I investigate how differences are made (ir)relevant in girls' navigations of sexiness and sexy selfies, and how interferences between multiple differences contribute to the performance of intersectional identities. It will become clear that girls' navigations and identifications interact with dominant gendered, heteronormative, racialised, classed and religious discourses about sexiness, as well as with the materiality of girls' bodies, their social position and the specific context of self(ie)-making practices. Involving this complexity in discussions about sexy selfies can create promising opportunities for interrogating social norms, stereotypes and power inequalities.

5.1 Introduction

Over the last years, girls' 'sexy selfies' have become highly politicised. Both selfies that are shared in private sexting interactions and selfies that are shared in more public spaces, such as profile pictures, are often met with disapproval. Popular and academic discussions have focussed on risks such as bullying, harassment, blackmailing and sexual violence (for overviews of these studies, see Salter, Crofts, and Lee 2013; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015); on the psychological problems these pictures might cause or indicate,

such as narcissism and body dysmorphia (for overviews, see Burns 2015; Senft and Baym 2015); and on how the images contribute to girls' and women's presumed 'sexualisation', objectification and commodification (for an overview, see Tiidenberg 2018). Feminist sociologists and cultural media studies scholars have pointed out how these discourses have resulted in moralising responses, aimed at preventing especially teen girls from making and sharing sexy selfies (e.g. Renold and Ringrose 2011; Burns 2015; Hasinoff 2015; Ringrose 2016).

While moralising discourses discourage girls from performing sexiness, 'post-feminist' discourses (McRobbie 2009) call upon girls to use their presumed sexual freedom to pursue sexual pleasure, making it normative for girls to produce themselves as desirable heterosexy subjects (Gill 2007b, 2009; Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010). This call is reflected and reinforced through (social) media, which facilitate the mass distribution of heterosexy 'dreamgirl' imagery (Dobson 2011, 2015) and contribute to pressures around displaying heterosexy bodies (Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas 2011; Burns 2015; Ringrose and Harvey 2015b). Girls are thus confronted with contradictory norms: while they are encouraged to perform heterosexiness, they risk moral condemnation and slut shaming when they do so (Ringrose et al. 2013).

Very few studies have involved teen girls' own reflections on sexy selfies, or sexiness in general (Lamb et al. 2016). Studies that did include teen girls' voices revealed that girls navigate sexiness in ways that both challenge and reproduce contemporary discourses (Duits 2008; Ringrose 2008; Duits and Zoonen 2011; Jackson and Vares 2011; Ringrose 2011; Ringrose et al. 2013; Jackson and Vares 2015; Ringrose and Harvey 2015b; Lamb and Plocha 2015; Lamb et al. 2016). These studies demonstrate that 'doing sexy' is not 'just' a matter of sexual seduction, narcissist vanity, insecurity, or self-objectification as presumed in dominant discourses, but also part of the performance of subjectivity, or, more specifically: of gender and sexuality. Through their navigations of sexiness, girls position themselves as 'good girls' (Jackson and Vares 2011) and perform 'desirable but not too slutty' femininity (Ringrose 2011). Some authors pointed out that girls' performances of gender and sexuality are also influenced by girls' positions in terms of class (Ringrose 2008; Duits and Zoonen 2011; Jackson and Vares 2011; Ringrose et al. 2013), ethnicity/race (Ringrose et al. 2013; Lamb and Plocha 2015; Lamb et al. 2016) and religion (Duits and Zoonen 2011).

With this article, which is based on one and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch young people aged 12-18, I contribute to and extend this field of research by exploring how through their navigations of sexy selfies, girls perform not only gender and sexuality, but also other axes of social differentiation. I investigate the different ways in which girls

navigate sexiness and sexy selfies, which differences are made (ir)relevant in these navigations, and how this is intertwined with the performance of intersectional identities.

5.2 Sexiness and the performance of intersectional identities

In research about young people's online practices and the performance of identity, two approaches can be discerned. One of these regards online practices as representational acts. These studies investigate how people represent themselves online, using concepts such as self-(re)presentation and impression management (e.g. Holloway and Valentine 2003; boyd 2008a; Stern 2008; Papacharissi 2009). Identity is assumed to be something a person has, develops, constructs or performs offline, and that can be represented more or less honestly online.

This approach has received critique for oversimplifying and underestimating online practices. Instead, scholars suggested conceptualising online practices as performative acts that are not mere 'representations' or 'biographies' of offline subjects, but an integrated part of all performative acts that produce the subject (e.g. Doorn 2010; Ringrose 2011; Cover 2012; Bailey et al. 2013; Ridder and Bauwel 2013; Warfield 2016). Many of these researchers are inspired by Butler's work on performativity (1990, 1993), which argues that identities are not an expression of some stable, inner core, but instead a 'repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (1990, 33). Identity is therefore conceptualised by Butler not in terms of 'being', but in terms of 'doing': as a continuous repetition of acts. The present article is situated in this strand of research, and conceptualises young people's online and offline practices related to 'sexy selfies' as 'performative acts of identity which constitute the user' (Cover 2012, 178).

Empirical studies of (adult) selfie sharing practices have demonstrated that such an approach is fruitful in exploring the dynamics of identity performance. Several of these studies demonstrated how processes of making, selecting, sharing and discussing selfies produce gendered and often heteronormative subject positions (Ringrose 2010; Dobson 2011; Ringrose 2011; Bailey et al. 2013; Ridder and Bauwel 2013; Dobson 2015; Tiidenberg 2015; Warfield 2016; Tiidenberg 2018). Tiidenberg (2018) for instance found that women's reflexive selfie practices may carve out subject positions that fit in between those of 'self-objectification' and 'joyless rejection of [...] sexiness': by sharing sexy selfies and reflecting on what they liked about those selfies, her research

participants produced selves that felt comfortable in their skin. In her analysis of four young women's selfie taking practices, Warfield (2016) emphasises the material-discursive entanglements of bodies, selves and images. In making 'the cut', that is the choice whether an image is suitable or not for online sharing, women perform the boundaries of the self. Studies such as these demonstrate that Butler's theory of performativity is highly relevant to the study of selfies, selves, and the ways in which these are interrelated.

Contemporary western culture compels the articulation of a self that is recognisable, and in line with available categorisations and discourses of selfhood (Butler 1990; Cover 2012). In the introduction, I described how contemporary discourses of sexiness are gendered and heteronormative, with competing narratives of 'moral/sexting panics' on the one hand, and 'post-feminist sexual freedom/pleasure' on the other hand. Discourses of sexiness are also racialised and classed however. Race seems to work in contradictory ways. Girls that are framed as being in need of 'protection' against 'sexualisation' are generally white girls (Renold and Ringrose 2011; Egan 2013; Mulholland 2017). Girls of colour, if taken into account at all, are conceptualised differently. In some narratives, they are conceptualised as incapable of performing sexiness due to their assumed 'oppression' (Mulholland 2017, 601-3). On the other hand, girls and women of colour are also presented as (hyper)sexual, and while sexy white women are presented as victims of sexualisation or as empowered, active subjects, sexy women of colour are more easily labelled as 'out-of-control' or as 'sluts' (Lamb and Plocha 2015; Lamb et al. 2016; Wekker 2016), or interpreted as exotic, passive objects (Gill 2009, 150; Wekker 2016, 32). These analyses indicate that discourses about sexiness carry specific, sometimes contradictory, racialised connotations.

Moreover, discourses about sexiness are classed, with middle-class sexiness being defined against the 'sexual puritanism' associated with the bourgeoisie and, simultaneously, against the 'looseness' or 'sluttishness' associated with lower class sexuality (Gill 2009, 150). Taking this argument one step further, one can read fears about girls becoming 'too sexy' as fears about corruption of the middle class (Egan 2013, 7-8), that reproduce once more the 'othering' of working-class sexuality (Renold and Ringrose 2011, 391).

In this article, I analyse whether and how girls refer to gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity in their navigations of sexy selfies, but also whether there are other categorisations that matter to them. This is inspired by intersectional thinking (Crenshaw 1993), which argues that 'gender cannot and should not be studied in isolation from race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion or other structures of power because they do not exist in isolation from one another, but instead always intersect' (Smiet 2017, 19).

The framework of intersectionality has been criticised for its static conceptualisation of categories. According to Krebbekx, Spronk and M'charek (2016, 3), the framework 'assumes categories as given, knowable and stable' and 'claims to know which categories matter, and who belongs to them'. Instead, these authors propose to understand differences as 'always in the making'. Indeed, this dynamic use of the intersectional framework has been advocated by multiple gender studies scholars, who demonstrated the importance of understanding 'when, how and under which circumstances specific intersections emerge and become salient' (Davis and Zarkov 2017). Such an understanding of intersectionality calls for contextualised analyses of the (un)making of different intersecting identities.

In further unravelling the relation between the (un)making of different categories, Moser (2006) argues that the enactment of one difference may support and reinforce the enactment of other differences, but may also contradict, challenge or undo them. Positions, identities and differences are thus not given, stable and singular, but emerge in the coming together ('interference') of different ordering processes (Moser 2006, 543-4). This dynamic and complex understanding of identity is central to the present article.

5.3 Research methods

This article is based on one and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch young people aged 12-18 (2013-14), in which I combined participation, observation, conversation and a survey to allow for a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973). In this article, I only use the qualitative part of the study, consisting of one years of online and offline participant observation. Most offline participant observation took place in schools (mainly in two schools; one offering secondary vocational training[49] and one preparing for vocational college and academic learning[50]) and in public transport, for instance in the bus between the train station and the school. I observed how young people behaved and interacted, and sometimes engaged in 'small talk' (Driessen and Jansen 2013). This participant observation enabled me to take young people's daily lives as a starting point, following them as they navigated through different online and offline spaces, observing their daily activities and their verbal and non-verbal comments on the topics of sexuality and social media.

For the online participant observation, I established online connections with participants whom I had met offline, following them into the online

[49] In Dutch: vmbo.
[50] In Dutch: havo/vwo.

spaces they used. In combining online and offline participant observation, I follow Ringrose and Eriksson Barajas (2011, 126), who state that 'methodologically drawing a boundary between online and offline [...] experiences has been a weakness in prior research,' for instance because it denies the significance of online experiences in offline lives. I therefore combined offline and online research to gain a more in-depth understanding of participants' selfie making practices.

In addition to the participant observation, I conducted 28 individual and duo-interviews, two group interviews and six focus group meetings. Two focus group meetings and one group interview were conducted together with MA students.[51] These discussions and interviews allowed me to ask research participants more about their previous experiences and about their motivations, feelings and opinions regarding sexuality and social media. While the focus group discussions and group interviews were particularly helpful in constructing an overview of which social media were used for what kinds of practices, as well as for investigating how young people discuss issues related to sexuality and social media with each other, the individual and duo-interviews allowed for a more in-depth exploration of research participants' personal experiences. Participants who were involved in this qualitative part of the research project were diverse with regard to their identifications in terms of gender, age, educational level, ethnic background, sexual identification, and religion. They have been made anonymous to protect their privacy.

Drawing together different types of data enabled me to attend to the material as well as the discursive aspects of selfie making practices, both of which play a crucial role in producing 'the self(ie)' (Warfield 2016). In this article, I focus on the discursive aspect. Girls' reflections and discussions are analysed as *acts* rather than *facts* however: as rhetorical efforts contributing to the performance of subjectivity (see also Duits 2008; Roodsaz 2015). The data were analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Themes that were derived from the available literature were for instance making/sharing/commenting on selfies, performance of identity, gender and slut-stigma. Additional themes that were identified concerned young people's definitions of sexiness, their different ways of navigating sexiness (embracing

[51] Two focus group meetings and one group interview were conducted by the author together with Master's students, who used the data as part of their MA theses. The two focus group meetings were organised and chaired by the MA students: one by Queeny Eugenia and one by Marjoke Tiems. The group interview was chaired by the author, together with two other Master's students – Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée. All other focus group meetings and interviews were conducted by the first author.

and/or rejecting sexiness), and the multiple axes of social difference that play a role, including the undertheorised categories of smartness, maturity and popularity. The combination of deductive and inductive coding facilitated the identification of both familiar and new themes in my data, and enabled me to develop a critical, detailed and youth-centred analysis of dominant conceptions of sexiness.

5.4 Defining sexy selfies

Central to this article are '(sexy) selfies'. In general, the word 'selfie' is used to refer to a specific type of picture: a self-portrait taken by a person themselves at arm's length or in a mirror (Karaian 2015, 337). Among research participants, the word selfie was not very popular. Rather, participants used the broader concept of 'pictures', and hardly ever made a distinction between selfies and other portrait pictures, such as pictures taken by a friend. Therefore, this study also involves those other portrait pictures. I do refer to these pictures as selfies though, in order to capture the unique character of digitally shared pictures in terms of their networked distribution, consumption and ubiquity (Donnachie 2015). In this section, I will first outline some general trends in research participants' definitions of 'sexy selfies'. These were common among participants with different backgrounds.

Most research participants considered making, sharing and caring about selfies a 'girl thing'. Sometimes, the topic of a conversation even 'automatically' changed from pictures in general towards girls' pictures; a mechanism that also occurs in wider public and academic debates about selfies (Burns 2015). Especially *sexy* selfies were often framed in this gendered way, even to the extent that some research participants found it hard to imagine what a boy could do to look sexy (see also Handyside and Ringrose 2017).

In trying to define what makes a girl's picture 'sexy', research participants typically referred to certain bodies, outfits, poses, and contexts. Bodies that were usually associated with sexiness were 'slender but curvy' (especially breasts and bottom), healthy and able, and 'young', with long legs and a 'pretty' face that is symmetrical, without braces or glasses, and with a smooth skin, full lips and long hair (see also Naezer 2006; Duits 2008; Gill 2009; Orbach 2009). These beauty standards are reinforced and raised through social media's features that allow for pictures to be edited.

Outfits and poses that were typically regarded as contributing to sexiness were those that were evaluated as 'emphasising' (certain parts of) the body. Outfits that were generally considered as (potentially) sexy were outfits that left 'some' skin uncovered, especially that of breasts, belly, legs and bottom,

and outfits that 'revealed' bodily shapes. Outfits that were often brought up were tight shirts and trousers, shirts revealing cleavage (*inkijk)*, crop tops revealing bellies, and short skirts and shorts. Research participants explained that certain outfits were sexier in some contexts than in others. For instance, bikini pictures were regarded as more sexual if they were taken in a bedroom than if they were taken on the beach. Poses that were often described as (potentially) sexy were poses that were evaluated as 'emphasising' buttocks or breasts (e.g. flexed hip, leaning forward) or lips ('duck face'[52]). The characteristics that are regarded as markers of sexiness are thus multiple and to some extent subjective, and research participants engaged in lively debates about whether specific pictures were sexy or not. These debates became especially vigorous when they concerned girls' *own* pictures.

In these debates, it became clear that rather than demonstrating a unified girl culture, girls negotiated sexiness in different ways. In many instances, girls rejected sexiness and resisted a labelling of their own selfies as sexy (see also Ringrose 2011). One important reason for this became clear during a focus group meeting, where I asked participants whether sexiness is different for boys and girls:

Judith:	[When boys share a sexy picture] it is more like: look at me, six-pack. For girls it is more like: look at me, I have boobs, and boys will think: aha, so she is in for it.
[...]	
Marijke:	So for girls it is more related to sex than for boys?
Marian and Vera:	Yes.
Vera:	It's more normal to see a boy with a six-pack than a girl with cleavage.
[Agreeing sounds]	
Judith:	For a girl, it's like: she's such a whore.

A lot can be said about this interaction and its reproduction of the gender binary, double sexual standards and heteronormativity, but what I want to emphasise here is these girls' interpretation of sexiness as a marker of sluttishness. This association between sexiness and sluttishness, which was common among research participants, makes it complicated for girls to share selfies that might be evaluated as sexy, or even to claim a positive attitude towards sexiness and sexy selfies.

Other girls did share selfies that could be labelled as sexy, and some girls even enthusiastically embraced sexy selfies, made and shared them,

[52] A facial expression with touted lips.

and defended them against negative comments. These pictures sometimes brought them considerable advantages. Research participants explained for instance how sexy pictures could help to attract the attention of potential partners, contribute to intimate or erotic conversations, result in positive feedback and feelings of self-esteem and connectedness, and help to increase popularity (see also Ringrose 2011; Ringrose et al. 2013; Lamb et al. 2016). Indeed, I observed both young people and adults rewarding 'sexy' pictures with compliments. Sexiness is thus not only rejected, but also embraced. In the following paragraphs, I will further explore girls' different positionings towards sexiness and sexy selfies, and analyse how these contribute to the performance of intersectional identities involving not only gender and sexuality, but also other axes of social difference.

5.5 Embracing sexiness

In some instances, research participants embraced sexiness. This happened for instance during a focus group meeting with five girls of colour who were selected based on their identification as (Dutch-)Antillean.[53] Participants were asked to comment on five Facebook profile pictures of girls and women unknown to them. Some of the pictures might be evaluated as sexy or even 'slutty', based on the outfits and poses (e.g. 'bikini pictures'). The focus group participants were aware that some people might consider the pictures to be 'slutty', but explicitly refused to categorise them as such. One of the girls remembers a similar case:

Cynthia: Yesterday I witnessed an argument on Facebook about a profile picture. You really saw her boobs on the picture, and her best friend told her to take it off. [...] But I thought that it was a normal picture. Well, you did see her boobs a bit too much, but I would not comment on that. But those Dutch kids, they do react.

Joella: But they consider everything [that is sexy] as being wrong.

[53] This focus group was organised as part of Queeny Eugenia's MA project about Dutch-Antillean girls' constructions of sexuality and ethnicity. Girls were selected based on their identification as '(Dutch-)Antillean'. Such a framing is rather static in comparison to this article's approach of identity as performative. In the analysis of the data however, I approach ethnicity as a social construction, and explore whether, when, and how it became relevant in these girls' navigations of sexiness. At the same time, the framing of the focus group meeting did highlight ethnicity, which probably influenced girls' responses, as will be reflected on later.

According to Cynthia and Joella, peers with a Dutch ethnic-cultural background have a relatively negative attitude towards sexy pictures. Later, during a discussion about one of the 'bikini pictures', the girls extend this argument:

Enith:	If this were a Moroccan girl [on the picture], they [Moroccans] would say she is a whore.
Queeny:	And what would a Dutch girl say?
Cynthia:	Nice but too nude.
Joella:	[...] Outrageous, too nude!!
Enith (in a posh voice):	So trashy ... [*ordinair*]

Not only people with a Dutch background, but also those with a Moroccan background have a negative attitude towards sexy selfies, according to the Antillean girls. They contrast this to their own attitudes:

Carmen:	Well, excuse me, but if I like it then nobody tells me ...
Cynthia:	Exactly! If I like it, nobody has the right to object.

Carmen and Cynthia claim to be unaffected by other people's comments on their pictures: if they want to share a sexy selfie, they will do that. Their attitude is 'typically Antillean', they explain while discussing a picture of a woman whom they consider to be overweight: 'This could be a typical Antillean woman. This is an Antillean woman, because fat Antillean women don't give a damn. [...] They just think: I will wear this, I like it, and I will go out in it.' According to the girls, Antillean women express pride of their body by showing off that body, regardless of possible negative comments. This contradicts Lamb and Plocha's findings (2015), which describe how girls of colour in another context, namely the US, refer to 'respectability' rather than sexiness in their performance of black femininity. For my research participants, their positive attitude towards sexiness functioned as a marker of ethnic difference between them and other girls. Their emphasis on embracing sexiness can be interpreted as a form of boundary work, that reproduces ethnic boundaries and contributes to the performance of Antillean (and sexy) femininity. This was supported by the context of this particular focus group meeting, which was explicitly aimed at girls identifying as Antillean; a framing that strongly highlighted ethnicity.

One of the remarks quoted above reveals that there is more to say about this meeting however. By commenting in a posh voice that Dutch peers would regard a bikini picture as 'trashy', Enith brings class into the discussion. She

categorises Dutch people's presumed negative evaluations of sexy pictures as a 'higher class reaction', and distances herself from such an identity by mocking it; a strategy called 'anti-pretentiousness' by Skeggs (2004, 114). Skeggs explains that on the one hand, this strategy functions to critique people from higher social classes, but on the other hand it also operates as a mechanism that keeps people in their classed place. Enith categorises her own positive attitude towards sexy pictures as 'lower' class, and reclaims this as a positive identification. Gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class thus intersect in the girls' comments on sexy selfies, through which these girls perform lower class, Antillean, sexy femininity. Moreover, through this performance they redefine sexiness as a form of 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2010) that can work in their advantage, especially when other forms of capital (economic, social, cultural) are less accessible to them.

5.6 Rejecting sexiness

Whereas in some instances girls embraced sexiness, in many others they (partly) rejected it. This happened for example during an interview with one of the 'older' girls, Femke (18), who had just started her bachelor studies at the university of applied sciences. We met at her school, and talked about her study before we started the actual interview. At one point during the interview, Femke explains that she does have some experience with sharing sexy selfies, but she immediately nuances this: 'But of course, I'm more careful about what kind of pictures I send to whom, and what I post online, than girls who are still in secondary education. Because sharing such pictures is risky.' According to Femke, the difference between secondary school pupils and university students is not just about age, but also about maturity: 'Here [at the university of applied sciences], people are more mature.' Maturity is an important dimension for young people, which is associated with positive characteristics (see also Duits 2008). For Femke, reproducing the 'danger discourse' about sexy selfies and partly rejecting these pictures worked to distance herself from girls in secondary education, and to perform a self that is not only 'older', but also more 'mature'; a performance that was supported by the place where the interview took place and my questions about her studies prior to the interview.

The (partial) rejection of sexy selfies was also related to the construction of other differences and the performance of other identifications. For instance, while interviewing 'higher' educated girls about sexy selfies, these girls repeatedly advised me to also interview 'lower' educated girls. According to Erica (14), I had a higher chance of finding sexy selfies among lower educated girls, because: 'vocational students are worse. They

curse more, are trashier, with short skirts that show their ass and shirts that are too small, with leopard print.' During a focus group meeting, Lea (15) provides a slightly different explanation: 'I think that people with a lower [educational] level are ready for certain things earlier and think less about the consequences of their actions. The consequences of being with different boys, or of posting pictures of yourself online.' Both Erica and Lea thus associate sexy/slutty pictures with a 'lower' educational level, which especially Erica associates with classed characteristics such as bad taste, lack of reflexivity and responsibility, and hypersexuality/sluttishness. This fits in the longer history of the slut category carrying particular 'lower class' connotations such as 'tastelessness' (Skeggs 2004; Attwood 2007). Distancing themselves from sexy selfies and saying that I should interview 'lower' educated girls, worked for Erica and Lea to construct educational level as a relevant category, and to perform a higher class, higher educated femininity; a performance that was afforded by the school context in which the interviews took place.

Girls who are 'lower' educated don't have such an obvious lower educated group to contrast themselves with. Nevertheless, they too make claims about smartness, like Kyra (15) did in an interview:

Kyra:	I never have stupid pictures ... Never made stupid pictures of myself.
Marijke:	What are stupid pictures?
Kyra:	Undressing for a picture, I don't do that. Do I look like a fool to you?

Contrary to the Antillean girls described in the previous section, Kyra distanced herself from sexy selfies, claiming that she did not make such pictures because she 'knew better' (see for similar findings Jackson and Vares 2011, 139; Lamb et al. 2016, 537). She explicitly linked this to her identity as 'not a fool', thereby constructing smartness as a relevant category and performing a smart, knowing self that carries higher educated/higher class connotations, while at the same time making her 'lower' educational level less relevant. This performance of 'smart girl' femininity, which is part of present-day post-feminist discourse (Pomerantz and Raby 2017), intersect with ethnicity, as Kyra's whiteness probably contributes to her being able to do this: in Dutch culture and abroad, whiteness usually connotes higher class status (which is in turn associated with smartness), while blackness is more easily associated with lower class status (Wekker 2016, 47).

Nevertheless, also girls of colour used a rejection of sexiness as a way of claiming smart femininity. Although it does not directly address sexy selfies,

this observation of a sex education class for girls (both white and of colour) is a telling illustration:

> Class is about to start and most pupils have already arrived when Rita comes in. She wears an orange, tight, short dress with black tights, slippers and a short black jacket. The dress only just covers her buttocks and as she sits down, her underpants become visible. Upon her arrival in class, the atmosphere changes. The girls sitting across Rita look at her and start giggling. Rita notices and pulls her skirt down a little. Two girls repeatedly ask if Rita went to see somebody in that outfit, emphasising the word 'that' with a disdainful tone of voice. During the entire class, the atmosphere remains noisy. Rita herself is quiet, and has only little interaction with the other girls.

By condemning and correcting Rita's sexiness, the other girls not only distance themselves from her, but also construct themselves as being in a position where they can advise her about where to go in such an outfit, thereby communicating that they 'know better'. This specific performance of smart femininity was facilitated by Rita's background as a girl that was formerly in a school for special education; a characteristic that is associated in dominant discourse with dependence and helplessness (Benjamin 2002), which put the other girls in a position of power from where they could openly criticise Rita's sexy appearance and thereby position themselves as smarter, and by implication as higher class.

Yet another dimension seems to be at stake here. One week after this particular observation, I participated in the same group. Rita was not present; she had been transferred back to the school for special education. This time, another girl, Sydney, wears a short skirt, probably even shorter than Rita's orange skirt, with black tights similar to Rita's. Not a single negative comment is made about Sydney's skirt though, and during class, Sydney and the other girls share stories about adventures they experienced together. Sydney is much more popular than Rita, which seems to provide her with extra space for performing sexiness (for a more elaborate discussion on the relation between heterosexiness and popularity, see Duncan 2004). This role of popularity was voiced explicitly by another research participant, Erica (14). Erica was very much aware of the slut stereotype, and complained to me about Amy, whom she considered slutty because she 'always' posted selfies showing cleavage or with an 'accidental' bra somewhere in the background. Indeed, in daily conversations, interviews and a WhatsApp group, research participants talked very negatively about Amy, and called her a 'slut'. However, when I asked Erica about the profile

picture of her classmate Tess showing a bare shoulder and a small piece of bra, she replied: 'But she is sweet so then it is allowed.' Here too the popular girl gets more space for performing sexiness than the less popular girl. Vice versa, this also means that performing sexiness or demonstrating a positive stance vis-à-vis sexiness can in some cases contribute to the performance of popularity.

5.7 Contradictory positionings

Girls' positionings towards sexiness can be ambiguous and inconsistent. One case that demonstrates this is the case of a Christian girl (Judith, 15), who voiced contradictory opinions about sexiness during a focus group meeting with girls identifying as Christian.[54] Religion was often described by girls as a reason to reject sexiness, and also during this focus group meeting, research participants indicated that looking sexy was 'un-Christian'. At several moments, Judith (15) agreed with this and demonstrated a negative attitude towards sexiness. For instance, she explained that in order to be recognised as a Christian girl, she did not share sexy selfies in online spaces such as Facebook, and she made several negative comments about sexy outfits. She even showed us a 'joke' on her phone of a girl revealing cleavage, accompanied by the text: 'Only God can judge me', followed by an image of God, answering: 'You're a whore.' Judith couldn't stop laughing about this slut-shaming 'joke' and showed it to the other girls, who agreed with her that this was funny. By sharing this image, and laughing about it, Judith constructs religion as a relevant category, distances herself from the sexy girl on the picture, and performs a 'pious' Christian femininity that was recognised and rewarded by her peers.

At other moments however, Judith took a much more 'un-Christian' position. For instance, while the other participants agreed that French kissing should happen only after a girl has flirted with somebody for a while, Judith said: 'You can also kiss ... for example at a party, when you see somebody whom you don't know, and you just kiss that person. You don't have to flirt first.' She also openly discussed her romantic and sexual experiences.

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[54] This focus group was organised as part of Marjoke Tiems' MA project about Christian girls' navigations of sexual norms. Similar to the case of the 'Antillean girls', our framing of the meeting emphasised the importance of religion, which probably influenced the girls' responses. Nevertheless, in my analysis I approached religious identifications as socially constructed, and investigated whether, when and how they were made relevant.

About monogamy, a norm that was regarded as important by the other focus group participants, Judith said: 'If I see a cute guy, even when I'm in a relationship, I'll just flirt with him. That's just who I am.' About 'sexy outfits' she commented: 'To God, it doesn't matter. He created us and always sees us, also when we're in the shower, so ... Why would you be ashamed?' Judith even explained that she liked to dress sexy in spaces where (adult) church members were not part of the audience, although she did emphasise that this was a 'classy' type of sexy, thereby distancing herself from 'slutty' femininity while reinforcing the classed connotations of women's sexiness. These (partly) positive positionings towards sexuality and sexiness seem contradictory to her identification as Christian, and the rejection of sexiness that is associated with that identification.

According to Judith however, the two positionings can go together because of her age: 'It's also about age. Because we hit puberty, and then you want to try things out, and that's allowed I think, also if you're a Christian.' Judith did not feel the need to completely reject sexiness, because she identified not just as a Christian girl, but as a *young* Christian girl. By making this statement during the focus group meeting, she constructed age as a relevant category and performed young, Christian, sexy femininity. At the same time, by taking a positive stance towards sexy selfies and sexual activities more general, Judith made clear that her young, Christian, sexy subjectivity was not an 'immature' subject position. For young people, the body and sexuality play a crucial role in the performance of maturity (Duits 2008). Being self-confident, being able to talk about sexuality without (showing) discomfort, and being sexually active (within certain limits) were usually regarded as signs of maturity. Against this background we can understand Judith's emphasis on being 'open' about her romantic and sexual relations, and her (partly) positive attitude towards sexiness and sexy selfies, as contributing to the construction of a Christian sexy self that is not just young, but also mature.

5.8 Conclusion

In this article, I analysed how teen girls perform intersectional identities through their navigations of sexiness and sexy selfies. While feminist sociologists and cultural media studies scholars have pointed out that dominant discourses about sexiness are contradictory, with post-feminist discourses encouraging girls to perform heterosexy femininity and moralist discourses discouraging them from performing sexiness, only few studies have analysed teen girls' own reflections on sexiness and sexy selfies. My analysis demonstrates that girls navigate sexiness and sexy selfies in different

ways: they may (partly) reject sexiness, (partly) embrace it, or take a more contradictory position and both reject and embrace it. These positionings are not static, and they may change even in the course of one conversation.

As my analysis shows, girls' navigations of sexiness are a form of boundary work: by labelling their position towards sexiness as markers of difference, girls (un)make differences among themselves, and perform complex intersectional identities. Axes of social difference that play a role in this process are not just the axes of gender and sexuality, which have been central to previous studies about girls' and women's navigations of sexy selfies, but also other axes. Some of these are well-known (ethnicity, class, educational level, religion), whereas others have remained largely invisible in previous studies of youth, sexuality and social media (smartness, maturity, popularity). The constructions of multiple differences interfere in ways that may be dynamic, unpredictable and even surprising, resulting in a wide variety of possible subject positions.

My study also showed how girls' positionings and identifications interact not only with dominant gendered, heteronormative, racialised, classed and religious discourses about sexiness, but also with the materiality of girls' bodies (e.g. bodily shape, skin colour), with girls' perceived social position (e.g. popularity, educational level, class) and with the specific context in which the topic is being discussed (e.g. an interview in a specific school setting, or a focus group meeting framed in a particular way). This means that while the interferences between constructions of multiple differences can be dynamic, unpredictable and surprising, they do not exist in a social and material vacuum, and they may also work to reproduce dominant categorisations, social norms, stereotypes and power relations.

These findings indicate that dominant popular and academic conceptualisations of 'sexy selfies' as no more than a matter of sexual seduction, narcissist vanity, insecurity, or self-objectification are extremely limited and ignore the link between sexiness, social categorisations and intersectional identities, not just in adult women's, but also in teen girls' selfie making practices. Acknowledging these interconnections, and making them part of the discussion about sexy selfies may create promising opportunities for interrogating social norms, stereotypes and power inequalities. These interrogations should concern not only gender and sexuality, but also other axes of social difference such as ethnicity, class, educational level, religion, age, smartness, maturity, and popularity.

Finally, my study illustrates that all these axes of social difference should be analysed as social constructions. While axes such as educational level and age are often presented as objective 'facts', my study demonstrates that they are in fact performative accomplishments, that can be performed for

instance through the rejection of sexy selfies. For research participants, this performative nature was captured in the concepts of smartness and maturity. Therefore, based on my analysis, I propose to use the concept of smartness in addition to educational level, and that of maturity in addition to age, much like we use gender in addition to sex, in order to facilitate a social constructionist analysis of young people's navigations of sexy selfies, sexiness and sexuality.

Chapter 6

Empowerment through sex education?

Rethinking paradoxical policies

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Chapter 6

Empowerment through sex education?

Rethinking paradoxical policies

Abstract

Empowerment is the main goal of sex education according to Dutch Government and NGO policies. Academics from different disciplines have argued, however, that the ideal of empowerment through education is problematic, because of the unequal power relations implicated in educational practices. Building on one-and-a-half years of online and offline ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch youth, this article argues that Dutch sex educational policies inhibit rather than encourage young people's empowerment by allowing only a limited number of sexual knowledge building practices to thrive while making others nearly impossible. In order to facilitate young people's empowerment, policies should aim to create space for young people to develop their own themes and priorities, to find a multitude of perspectives, to set the pace and to use different strategies for sexual knowledge building, including learning by doing and online learning. This requires a cultural shift that involves both an openness to young people's experimentation, and a change in existing power hierarchies based on age.

6.1 Introduction

European sex education is evaluated as being of high quality (Beaumont and Maguire 2013) and the Netherlands especially is regarded a frontrunner (Lewis and Knijn 2002; Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005). Since 1993, schools are obliged to offer sex education on different topics, although schools may decide for themselves how much time they spend on this work, as well as which approach, methods and materials they use (Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005, 174). Dutch school-based sex education programmes are often described as one of the most comprehensive and liberal programmes in the world (Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005, 182). According to Lewis and Knijn (2002, 685),

> the Dutch approach to the subject [of teenage sexuality] has been to encourage self-reliance, respect for self and respect for others. The approach has been positive, emphasising sex as part of everyday life and something to be celebrated.

This positive, empowering approach is remarkable in comparison to other countries, including European countries such as the UK, where debates about sex education are sometimes dominated by more conservative moral views (Lewis and Knijn 2002). Indeed, the Dutch Government states that the central aim of sex education is to empower young people by providing them with sexual knowledge so that later they can 'take their own responsibility' for building 'consensual, safe, and pleasurable sexual relations' (Bussemaker 2009, 3, 7-8; Schippers 2011, 53).

Even though this ideal of empowerment through education sounds promising, it has been questioned by researchers from different fields, most notably that of critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire 2005 [1970]; Ellsworth 1989; Gore 1990); a field that built on theoretical developments in other fields such as feminism, postcolonialism, queer theories, poststructuralism and postmodernism (Kincheloe 2008). Advocates of critical pedagogy critique education for reinforcing power hierarchies and hampering students' empowerment. Researchers working on the politics of sexuality education (Allen 2005; Rofes 2005; Rasmussen 2006; Allen 2011; Ringrose 2013) have also pointed out that this education is usually adult centred. In this paper, we will analyse how the paradoxical ideal of empowerment through education plays out in the case of Dutch sex educational policies, and to what extent these policies encourage or inhibit a process of sexual empowerment among youth through sexual knowledge building.

In order to do this, we take three steps. First, we broaden the scope of the discussion by using the concept of 'sexual knowledge building' instead of 'sex education' (White 2006). 'Sexual knowledge' is thereby understood in a broad sense: not just as 'facts', but as the entire 'bank of information' that an individual builds up about sexuality (White 2006, 13). Using the concept of sexual knowledge building instead of sex education is useful for broadening our understanding of sexual learning as a process that also takes place outside the context of teacher-led, school-based, formal education (see also Blake and Aggleton 2017; Byron and Hunt 2017). Moreover, the concept enables us to pinpoint what can make a learning process 'empowering', building especially on Rowlands' (1997) operationalisation of empowerment. Second, we discuss the extent to which Dutch sex educational policies facilitate the empowerment of young people through sexual knowledge building. Inspired by recent theoretical and empirical investigations into the potential of the

Internet (Harris 2003, 2005; Tsatsou 2012; Edwards et al. 2013; Szucs 2013; Byron and Hunt 2017), we will specifically explore young people's use of online spaces. Third, we reflect on the question how educational policies can be improved in order to encourage more profoundly the sexual empowerment of youth.

6.2 Empowerment through education?

According to Dutch government policies, sex education should prepare young people to take responsibility for their own sex lives. This means that the government sees sex education as a tool for empowerment; a concept that has been defined in different ways, but is always linked to people taking control over their lives (Rowlands 1997; Adams 2008; Eerdewijk et al. 2017). Adams defines empowerment as:

> the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximise the quality of their lives. (Adams 2008, xvi)

In this process, knowledge plays a crucial role (Rowlands 1997; Eerdewijk et al. 2017).

One important strategy for enabling people to build knowledge is that of (formal) education. However, several scholars have pointed out that education does not necessarily contribute to empowerment. As Freire (2005 [1970]) argued in his landmark analysis of adult education in Brazil, education developed and provided by those in power usually functions to reinforce existing power hierarchies. Such education positions the teacher as the narrating subject, while pupils are imagined as listening objects. The task of the teacher in this 'banking concept' of education is to 'fill' the students with what (s)he considers to constitute 'true knowledge' (Freire 2005 [1970], 72). According to Freire, the more effort students put into storing this knowledge, the less they develop a critical consciousness that would enable them to actively engage with the world. This contributes not to their empowerment, but to their oppression (Freire 2005 [1970], 73-5). Freire's work made a major contribution to the strand of critical pedagogy, which was later intertwined with theoretical developments in the fields of feminism, postcolonialism, queer theories, poststructuralism and postmodernism (Kincheloe 2008).

Researchers focusing on the politics of sexuality education (Allen 2005; Rofes 2005; Rasmussen 2006; Allen 2011; Ringrose 2013) brought hierarchies based on age to our attention, and criticised the educational system for being based on the goals set by adults. Major work in this area has been conducted by Allen (e.g. 2005, 2011) and Ringrose (e.g. 2013), who state that sex education is occupied mainly with the sexual health and control of the (young) population. As Ringrose (2013) points out, moralising panics over young people's sexual behaviours resonate with protectionist sex education policies that signal regulation rather than empowerment. Allen (2005, 2011) demonstrates how an adult-centred sex education system reinforces the unequal power balance between young people and adults. Instead of empowering young people, such education infantilises them by telling them 'what to do and think'. Analyses such as these demonstrate the difficulty of striving for empowerment through education.

In trying to find a 'solution' for this paradox, critical pedagogues have developed theories of how teachers can relate to students in more empowering ways. However, these theories often remain located within the framework of teachers empowering students; establishing teachers, not students, as the agents of empowerment (Gore 1990). Strategies based on such an approach, such as student empowerment and dialogue, 'give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact' (Ellsworth 1989, 306). Even researchers who are critical of this tendency often seek solutions within the context of the classroom. According to Ellsworth for example, the biggest challenge for her as a teacher is to construct different classroom practices (1989, 323). Halpern (2013) argues that it is time for a fundamentally different understanding of where learning can take place. However, in defining new learning spaces, he still focuses on formal institutions. In a recent article, Byron and Hunt (2017) emphasise the importance of informal learning, and argue that this type of learning is best facilitated by supporting informal knowledge settings.

In order to think outside of the educational/institutional framework, it is helpful to consider Rowlands' analysis, which demonstrates that for an empowerment initiative to be effective, participants should be free to act from their own analysis (1997, 134): that they are facilitated to develop their own themes (1997, 63), set their own priorities (1997, 25), work at their own pace (1997, 93), and tackle issues in their own ways (1997, 97). Because of this, organisations working on empowerment should be prepared to accept changes in existing power hierarchies (1997, 141). Rowlands warns that facilitating people to determine their own agenda does not mean an unquestioning acceptance of their ideas. On the contrary: challenging assumptions forms an intrinsic part of the process of empowerment (1997, 134).

Also helpful for thinking outside of the educational/institutional framework is White's analysis of learning about sexuality as a process of 'sexual knowledge building' rather than 'sexual education' (2006). According to White, sexual knowledge building is the continuous, complex process during which previous knowledge, experiences, and beliefs are used to construct meaning out of new pieces of information gathered in different ways from different sources. Such an approach is comparable to the 'jigsaw puzzle' metaphor that has been introduced to describe sexual knowledge (Jackson 1978; Thomson and Scott 1991), but by emphasising the continuous process of meaning making, White's approach is more dynamic: in the process of fitting in new pieces of information, both the existing puzzle and the new pieces will unavoidably undergo change. What is most important to the present article, however, is that all these analyses point to ways of learning and sources of knowledge that are often neglected in critical pedagogy, such as overhearing family members engaging in sexual intercourse (White 2006, 56). Sexual knowledge building thus consists of a broad range of experiences, which may also take place outside formal institutions (see also Jackson 1978; Thomson and Scott 1991; Blake and Aggleton 2017; Byron and Hunt 2017).

In this paper, we subscribe to the idea that knowledge, understood in a broad sense as described earlier, can play an important role in people's empowerment process, so long as the 'target group' is enabled to develop and follow their own agenda. Therefore, we analyse the extent to which educational policies facilitate young people in setting the agenda for sexual knowledge building. In order to place young people at the heart of our analysis, we move away from the (formal, adult centred) concept of 'education' to the broader concept of 'sexual knowledge building', which includes *all* activities that contribute to learning about sexuality. Studying educational policies from this perspective enables us to critically assess the assumptions behind sex educational policies about 'good knowledge' and 'acceptable' ways of learning about sexuality.

Specific attention will be paid to the role of the Internet and social media in young people's knowledge building practices, since these have transformed the mechanisms by which knowledge is produced and circulated (Edwards et al. 2013, 1). Edwards and colleagues argue that even though Internet technologies can create 'filter bubbles' (Pariser 2011), they also offer opportunities to develop and share counter-expertise, and to challenge expert knowledge organisations. Several researchers have discussed how these transformations influence the production and sharing of knowledge about sexuality (Tsatsou 2012). In her overview, Tsatsou concludes that on the one hand, online services and content recycle 'patriarchal and identity-rigid sexualities', while

on the other hand they also provide access to 'alternative or non-mainstream sexualities'. This double role is confirmed in case studies conducted among youth (Harris 2003, 2005; Szucs 2013; Byron and Hunt 2017), demonstrating the importance of contextualised studies, which is what we aim to do.

6.3 Methodology

For this study, the first author conducted one-and-a-half years (2013-2014) of ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch young people aged 12-18 and carried out a policy document analysis (2015-2016). The ethnographic fieldwork was guided by the question how young people perform sexuality, especially in relation to the increasing popularity of the social media. Participation, observation and conversation were combined to allow for a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973).

In the first year, online and offline participant observation was conducted. Offline participant observation took place in eight different schools, on public transport and at national meetings of young people participating in Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs). Most participant observation was conducted in two schools in a medium-sized city in the East of the Netherlands offering all levels of education. Alongside participant observation, 29 interviews and 7 focus group meetings[55] were conducted. Most of the interviewees were pupils of the schools where participant observation had been conducted; others were recruited via personal networks because of their specific backgrounds and/or experiences. This approach resulted in the participation of young people who were diverse with regard to gender, age, educational level, ethnic background, sexual identification and experiences, and religion. For the online participant observation, we generally followed the research participants who were also involved in our offline research, which helped us to better understand their online activities and to gain access to private accounts.

After one year of fieldwork, a survey was constructed to analyse how common some of the observed activities and patterns were. Moreover, the open questions allowed participants to mention experiences which they considered taboo or hard to talk about in face-to-face conversations. The

[55] Three focus group meetings were conducted by the first author together with a number of Master's students, who used the data as part of their MA theses. Two of these meetings were chaired by MA students: one by Queeny Eugenia and one by Marjoke Tiems. In these meetings, the first author was present only as an observer. The third meeting was chaired by the first author, together with two other Master's students – Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée. All other focus group meetings were conducted and chaired by the first author.

survey was completed by 679 Dutch young people.[56] 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. These pupils were diverse with regard to age, gender and educational level. Unfortunately, with regard to ethnicity there was little diversity as almost all pupils described their ethnic background as being 'Dutch'. We tried to recruit additional schools which were more ethnically diverse, but did not succeed, both because of practical reasons (e.g. busy school schedules and approaching summer holidays) and to the topic of the survey (see also Leurs 2012). Diversity in terms of sexual preferences, practices and identifications was also not very extensive, with heterosexuality being dominant. We were able to correct this by recruiting the other half of the participants via an online community for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) youth. Thus, the survey reports on a wealth of experiences, but the quantitative analyses are not representative and should be regarded as indicative. In this article, all research participants have been made anonymous.

Finally, we conducted a policy document analysis to understand how the process of sexual knowledge building is conceptualised by policy makers in the Netherlands, and what are considered to be 'good' knowledge and 'acceptable' ways of learning about sexuality. This is based on the idea that policies simultaneously reflect and reproduce dominant cultural ideas and practices related to sexual knowledge building. In other words, they are not only indicators of how a society conceptualises young people's process of sexual knowledge building, but also actively contribute to the construction of these conceptualisations, thereby building a framework wherein only certain knowledge building practices can thrive.[57]

In particular, we analysed two policy letters from the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, which is the portfolio holder responsible for sex education. These are the most recent policy documents that explicitly discuss sex education for young people. The first is a 24-page policy letter about sexual health written by (former) State Secretary Jet Bussemaker (2009). In this document, sex education is one of the central themes. The other document is the 82-page Bill titled 'Health Nearby' (*Gezondheid dichtbij)* (Schippers 2011), published by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport led

[56] The survey was conducted by the first author with the help of two Master's students: Nathalie Platter and Barbara Magnée.

[57] Even though policies are not the only factor influencing sexual knowledge building. For example, in the context of school-based sex education, Schutte et al. (2014) have demonstrated that the implementation of educational programmes depends on several factors, including teachers' curriculum-related beliefs.

by Minister Edith Schippers. The paragraph concerning the sexual health of young people (Schippers 2011, 53-4) confirms that Bussemaker's letter is still used as a guideline.

In addition to governmental policies, we also analysed policies of the NGOs that are subsidised by the Ministry to translate governmental policies into educational materials, most notably *Rutgers WPF* and *Soa Aids Nederland,* who have developed the educational kit that is most used in secondary schools: 'Long live love' (*Lang leve de liefde*) (Soa Aids Nederland 2014). We also analysed Rutgers WPF's 32-page 'Guideline for sexuality education' (Vlugt 2013), which is an edited translation of the European guidelines, as well as websites about sex education hosted by the two organisations.

6.4 The politics of Dutch sex education

In her policy letter, Jet Bussemaker states that she aims to:

> improve sexual health of the population [...] by facilitating the provision of enough factual knowledge to all Dutch citizens during the years they grow up [...] so that they have a sufficient basis for safe and consensual sex that they can enjoy [emphasis added]. (2009, 2)

By using words like 'enough' and 'sufficient' knowledge, Bussemaker implies that a certain basic set of knowledge exists that can be provided to all Dutch citizens in order to prepare them for sexual experiences. In the Dutch version of the *Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe* (Winkelmann 2010, see also European Expert Group on Sexuality Education 2016), Rutgers WPF describes learning about sexuality as a more continuous process, but still claims that it results in the development of 'adequate knowledge' (Vlugt 2013, 5), suggesting the existence of a certain quantity and quality of knowledge that is 'sufficient'.

This concept of 'sufficient', 'basic' or 'adequate' knowledge is not only applied to the cognitive domain of learning (Bloom et al. 1956). It returns in relation to a second domain of learning: the affective domain (Bloom et al. 1956) also known as 'attitudes', 'values' and/or 'norms'. In advising teachers about sex education, Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland argue that, 'Sexual and relational education in the school [...] makes [young people] develop *adequate* values and norms' [emphasis added].[58] Also Bussemaker

[58] See http://www.seksuelevorming.nl/onderwijssoort/voortgezet-onderwijs/starten-met-seksuele-vorming Accessed 14 June 2016.

refers to certain 'basic values' (autonomy, setting boundaries, reciprocity, and respect) that should be transferred to young people (2009, 7). Thus, 'basic' sexual knowledge entails not only 'enough' cognitive knowledge, but also certain 'adequate' attitudes.

A third domain of learning, next to the cognitive and affective domain, is the psychomotor or 'skills' domain (Bloom et al. 1956). This domain receives less attention in educational policies. Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland acknowledge the importance of this domain, but add, 'it is also difficult because children cannot practice sexual behaviour in a group or in class'. Still, they do argue that certain skills should be included in sex education, such as talking about wishes and boundaries and using contraception (Vlugt 2013, 14). Thus, for all three domains of learning, albeit with slightly less attention for skills, sex educational policies imply that education should be aimed at the transference of a standardised, basic set of 'adequate' knowledge, skills and attitudes.

This 'sexual foundation' should be acquired *before* people become sexually active, says Bussemaker: 'Each year, about 200.000 children become sexually active. It is important that they receive sexual education *before* they start having sex' [emphasis added] (2009, 7). A 2014 government campaign about sexuality uses a similar argument and encourages parents to 'discuss porn with your child, *before* the Internet does it' [emphasis added]. Also Soa Aids Nederland and Rutgers WPF advocate the following specific order: 'Many pupils lack the right knowledge and skills to make healthy sexual choices. Some have not been prepared enough for their first sexual contact'.[59] This demonstrates how in educational policies, learning about sex is separated from sexual experiences. Furthermore, the two are placed in an ideal order: theoretical learning first, followed by practical experience.

Policies about sex education locate 'good knowledge' primarily in specific spaces and persons, namely in the school and the home: in school teachers and parents. According to Bussemaker, '[i]t is logical that parents take care of enough and timely sexual education for their child; they are the primary caregivers'. However, not all parents succeed, she claims, and '[t]hose children will have to get their information elsewhere. In school, for example. Schools also have a task with regard to sexual education. Those who don't get enough information at home can partially make that up at school' (2009, 8). The Ministry specifically mentions parents and school teachers when discussing the use of educational materials on their website, stating that these

[59] See http://www.seksuelevorming.nl/onderwijssoort/voortgezet-onderwijs/het-belang-van-seksuele-en-relationele-vorming-het-voortgezet Accessed 10 August 2016.

'play an important role in the sexual upbringing of children'.[60] Also Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland call on parents and school teachers to discuss sexuality with children. This emphasis on parents and schools is consistent with international tendencies (e.g. Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017).

Although young people are excluded as sources of knowledge in educational policies, they are not completely absent in sex education. Experiences and opinions of young people are sometimes included in educational materials. At the same time, however, they are seriously distrusted. For example, Rutgers WPF and Soa Aids Nederland tell parents: 'Friends are important to young people. Click here to read more about peer pressure'.[61] Even though at first this statement seems to acknowledge the role of peers, it later dismisses them as suitable sources of knowledge by associating them with (negative) peer pressure, against which a young person must be defended by adults. Apparently, young people are only seen as valuable sources of knowledge when their contributions have been collected, edited and disseminated by adults (see also Allen 2011, 6).

In addition, the Internet and social media are met with suspicion:

> Now that social media are becoming more popular, children and young people can access information about sexuality en masse. The images and information [...] are often distorted, unbalanced and disrespectful. Sexual and relational education can contradict, correct and nuance this information. (Vlugt 2013)

This statement made by Rutgers WPF represents the social media as places where mostly 'wrong' information is to be found, which must be 'corrected' by sex educators. Also the governmental campaign mentioned above ('Discuss porn with your child, before the Internet does it') is based on the assumption that 'the Internet' will probably give young people 'wrong' information about porn.

At the same time, the Internet and social media are used by the government and educational organisations as an educational tool. Several websites have been developed with information for youth, parents, school teachers and other professionals,[62] and educational organisations have accounts on social media like Twitter and Facebook. The explanation for this can be found in

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60 See https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/soa-s-en-seksualiteit/inhoud/seksualiteit-van-jongeren

61 See http://www.uwkindenseks.nl/over-kinderen-en-pubers and http://www.uwkindenseks.nl/vrienden-en-groepsdruk Accessed 14 June 2016.

62 See, for example, sense.info, uwkindenseks.nl, seksuelevorming.nl, begrensdeliefde.nl

Bussemaker's policy letter: 'I find it important that there is mostly good information available [on the Internet]. Therefore, I had professionals develop a website that contains information about love, relationships, contraception, safe sex, etcetera' (2009, 10). Apparently, only information shared by educational organisations is considered 'good information'.

This ideal of sex education as a standardised process in which certain adults provide young people with a certain type and amount of knowledge at a certain moment in time and in certain ways contradicts the ideal of empowerment. It does not allow young people to develop their own themes and priorities, work at their own pace, and develop their own strategies for building sexual knowledge. In the following paragraphs, we will discuss how this hinders certain practices of sexual knowledge building that are important to young people.

6.5 Developing themes and priorities

By assuming that all young people can benefit from one standardised package of knowledge, educational policies deny the vast diversity among youth with regard to the themes and perspectives that are important to them. Through our survey, interviews and observations we encountered a variety of topics that research participants were interested in, ranging from the meaning of difficult or abstract words like 'orgasm' and 'love' to the functioning of body parts such as genitals and the clitoris; from issues such as gender and sexual identity to urban myths; from virginity and 'the first time' to sexual norms such as the heterosexual ideal; from suggestions on how to do certain sexual activities to 'safe sex', contraception and STDs; from pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood to sexual violence; and from suggestions with regard to love, romance and relationships to suggestions on how to communicate with (specific) others such as parents about these topics. This diversity poses a challenge to the narrow and standardised idea of 'basic' sexual knowledge that characterises much sex educational policy. Moreover, it makes clear that a limited set of formal sex education classes can never be sufficient to cover all topics that young people are interested in.

To further complicate this, the *type* of knowledge that young people look for also varies. Sometimes, young people search for knowledge that is perceived as 'objective', such as definitions, descriptions and statistics. However, equally important is knowledge that is considered to be 'subjective', such as other people's experiences, feelings and opinions.

Two types of 'subjective' knowledge came up during our research. The first was brought up by Lea (15) during a focus group meeting. Lea had

talked with her mother about the age of having intercourse for the first time, but had also visited an online forum: 'I want to wait [with having sex] very long, and I wanted to know whether other people find that ... normal'. On the forum, we observed a boy (14) asking his peers: 'Hey, I'm 14 years old and I'm worried because I talked very much about sex with a girl on MSN, really very much, and she made me come with all the horny things she said. Is this normal!?' For youth belonging to some kind of minority, hearing other people's opinions about their 'normalcy' was important subjective knowledge: '[I looked up information about] fetishes and so on, whether it's normal or not normal' (boy, 18, in survey). For many research participants, being 'normal' was an important goal, and therefore knowledge about what others consider as 'normal' is valuable information.

A second type of 'subjective knowledge' that research participants regarded as important was experiential knowledge (see also Byron and Hunt 2017). For example, Cindy (15), who had been sexually harassed by her uncle via WhatsApp, remembered to save all these conversations, because she had read a similar story in a magazine. The personal character of the story in particular had caused it to make a big impression on her, so that she remembered it and could use the information to deal with her own difficult situation.

Experiential knowledge is not just valued for the practical information it contains, however. It is also valued as a source of support, explained Lana (16) in an interview. While by the time of the interview she identified as a 'proud lesbian', this had not always been the case, and she had had an extremely difficult time accepting her attraction to girls. She used the social media, mainly YouTube, Tumblr and Youngandout (in Dutch: *Jongenout)*, to find people who 'had the same feelings'. Lana felt that because these experiential experts (those who based their expertise on personal experiences) had been through similar experiences, they understood her better than others, which enabled her to discuss the issues that she was struggling with. This resulted not only in acknowledgement and recognition of her feelings, but also in adequate advice and support.

Moreover, experiential experts functioned as role models for Lana: 'Being yourself, that's what I learned from them, not necessarily through talking with them, but also through watching their videos [...]. I thought: I want that too!' By explicitly and implicitly embracing their same-sex preferences, experiences and/or identities, experiential experts became role models for Lana.

Additionally, experiential experts helped Lana to confirm the 'normalcy' of her sexual preferences, which shows that experiential knowledge may overlap with the first type of 'subjective' knowledge, about what is considered to be 'normal'. Lana had severe doubts about her being 'normal', because:

'Nobody in my environment was homosexual, so I didn't know whether I was normal'. Additionally in school, homosexuality was hardly discussed (see also Meerhoff 2016). Finding people with similar experiences helped Lana to confirm that she was; that there were more people 'like her'. Moreover, these people came across as 'nice, funny people' with a 'good life', which helped Lana to confirm that identifying as a lesbian would not mean that she would have to identify as an 'abnormal' person. Thus, experiential knowledge is valuable for young people in transferring practical skills and information, providing support and inspiration, and confirming the 'normalcy' of experiences and feelings.

The themes and types of knowledge discussed here may be offered through formal education, but their variety makes it nearly impossible for schools to cover them all in a way that is satisfactory to all students. Moreover, young people do not always consider their school teachers to be the most suitable sources of knowledge, or their schools the best contexts to build sexual knowledge, as will become clear in the following sections.

6.6 Finding different perspectives

Adding an extra layer to Rowlands' operationalisation, our research also points at the importance of the perspectives that are allowed to play a role in sexual knowledge building. Finding people who are able and willing to confirm the 'normalcy' of certain feelings, experiences and identifications requires the availability of a multitude of perspectives; a requirement that is absent from Dutch sex educational policies.

One perspective that played a central role for research participants while being completely absent in sex educational policies is the perspective of young people themselves. Even though participants often regarded adults as appreciated sources of information, they also indicated that adults such as school teachers or parents were not always the most suitable persons to turn to, for reasons ranging from feelings of embarrassment to a striving for privacy and autonomy, and from a fear of being condemned or punished to scepticism towards adult knowledge and norms.

More often than not, peers played an important role in research participants' process of knowledge building, both in formal and in informal contexts (see also Forrest, Strange, and Oakley 2002, 2004; Kidger 2004; White 2006; Allen 2011; Szucs 2013; Byron and Hunt 2017). During participant observations we noticed many instances of (informal) sexual knowledge building among peers through casual or more profound conversations, remarks, gazes and jokes; showing that 'peer education' is

much more complex and interwoven with daily practices than is generally assumed in dominant, 'technicist' approaches of peer education (see also Southgate and Aggleton 2017).

In general, peers are highly appreciated as sources of knowledge. In the survey, respondents (n = 347) were asked whether they searched for information from adults, peers or both the last time they looked up information online. Only 9% of these respondents were looking for information from adults, 38% of them were looking for information from both adults and peers and 53% of the respondents were looking for information from peers. In particular, two sorts of information, namely suggestions for (communication about) sexual/romantic activities, and information about other people's experiences/feelings/opinions, were associated with peers.

In addition to being able to provide specific types of information, Kyra and her boyfriend Mark (17) also pointed out another advantage of information coming from peers:

Mark: Peers are the people you hang out with; you don't hang out with your GP.
Kyra: [...] Young people [...] are like yourself.

According to Kyra and Mark, peers felt 'closer', more 'alike' and were therefore a more suitable source of information than adults. Such a view was confirmed by a participant of a Gay Straight Alliance meeting, who said about discussing sexuality: 'A teacher is more distant [than a peer]. He or she grew up in a different period and does not know what it is like for you at this specific moment'. This links up with research among adults, which shows that people who feel 'close' often play a crucial role in the process of looking up and engaging with information about topics such as the Internet/computer (Bakardjieva 2005) and health (Wyatt et al. 2005).

Bakardjieva (2005, 99) calls these people 'warm experts' or 'an expert [...] in the professional sense or simply in a relative sense compared with the less knowledgeable other', who is 'immediately accessible in the user's life world as a fellowman/woman' and who mediates between universals and the concrete situation of the novice. Warm experts help others to understand the relevance of certain information for their own situations (Wyatt et al. 2005, 211-2). For young people, peers are in the ultimate position to function as warm experts, since they feel close, are immediately accessible, and often possess the knowledge and skills that are perceived as necessary at that moment.

Sometimes, young people specifically look for peers with a similar background or similar experiences, like Lana's story made clear. In other cases, young people want to discuss sexuality with peers whom they

consider to be *different*. Esra (15), a girl identifying as Muslim, liked reading about other girls' experiences and opinions on the online forum Girlscene.nl. She preferred reading the opinions of non-Muslim girls, because 'most Muslim girls are too strict, and I am not so strict'. According to Esra, most Muslim girls would label her as 'easy', because she had been in several romantic relationships and liked hanging out with boys. She believed non-religious girls were more open-minded and therefore preferred to build knowledge together with non-religious peers, although the aim of looking for 'different' peers is that she expects them to have similar ideas and values.

To some extent, formal contexts such as schools may be suitable to share such 'peer knowledge'. Our study confirms earlier findings in both theoretical and empirical research that describe peer education as 'successful' in different respects (Harden, Weston, and Oakley 1999; Turner and Shepherd 1999; Mellanby, Rees, and Tripp 2000; Kim and Free 2008). At the same time, we also observed that formal peer education was often developed, organised and controlled by adult professionals (see also Strange, Forrest, and Oakley 2002). Our research suggests however that even if form and content were to be controlled by peer educators, formal contexts may not always be the best contexts to learn from peers. This is related to the pace at which young people build sexual knowledge and to the strategies they use. We elaborate on this below.

6.7 Setting the pace

In sex educational policies, the moment at which certain knowledge should be 'learned' is highly standardised. This conflicts with young people's diverse needs and practices with regard to the pace in which they build sexual knowledge. The amount of interest in sexuality and sexual knowledge building among research participants ranged from 'not interested at all' to being 'extremely curious' (see also Dalenberg 2016). This difference was not necessarily linked to gender and/or age, as is often assumed. For example, while some 14-year-old research participants indicated not being interested in sex at all, others had already had their first sexual experiences. For the first group, sexual knowledge building was not a relevant issue, leading them to ignore information that crossed their path. For the second group however, sexual knowledge was often (though not always) a valuable good.

The amount of interest in sexuality and sexual knowledge building is not only diverse, but also highly dynamic. For example, when we asked survey participants whether they would like to have more information or education

about sexuality, several responded with remarks such as 'maybe in the future', and 'not at this moment in time', indicating that they expected their needs to change. Such a change does not necessarily involve a unidirectional change from less to more interest in sexuality: while at one point in time a young person may be very interested in learning about sexuality, this may change more or less quickly due to new circumstances, experiences or feelings. Young people look for different bits of information at different points in time (see also White 2006). This makes the standardised time schedule in sex educational policies highly problematic.

6.8 Using different strategies

The reliance of educational policies on a standardised model of knowledge building, which is especially aimed at formal, school-based teaching, hinders young people in developing 'other' strategies. One of those strategies is learning by doing. Several research participants contradicted the idea behind sex education that theory comes before practice; in their case, they had learned through practical experience. This is in line with arguments put forward by the progressive education movement, which started in the late nineteenth century and objected to the separation of theory and practice (e.g. Dewey 1963 [1899], 1972 [1938]).

For some young people, following the strategy of learning by doing was born from necessity. For others it was a deliberate choice. One of them was Femke (18), who found that (too much) theoretical knowledge hinders sexual pleasure: 'It is less exciting if you already know how it works'. Young people like Femke learn through experience and evaluate that as exciting. Even though they may appreciate some information and discussion, they also want to have the opportunity to 'figure things out' themselves and discover their preferences through practical experience.

A second strategy for building sexual knowledge that is severely mistrusted in policies while it is of major importance to young people, is the use of the Internet and social media. In our survey, 58% of the respondents (n = 603) indicated using the Internet/social media more or less often to find information about love, relationships and sexuality. Of these respondents (n = 347), 89% judged the information they found during their latest search 'useful' (49%) or 'somewhat useful' (40%). This is not to say that research participants *only* encountered useful information. On the contrary: several research participants expressed mixed feelings about online information: 'On the one hand the Internet is useful, on the other hand it isn't. Because half of what can be found online is nonsense' (Jelle, 13). Nevertheless, most

research participants agreed that there was also a large amount of very useful information to be found online.

The information young people find online is very diverse. It includes information offered by experts and laypersons, adults and peers and it may be found in formal or informal online contexts. The information also includes so called 'sexually explicit material' such as porn. Even though such materials are often condemned in dominant discourse, young people also describe them as instructive: 'You can learn about tricks and positions, which you may want to try out in your relationship' (Frank, 17). This is not to say that young people uncritically copy the activities they see online. Several research participants were very critical about the content of (mainstream) porn. Moreover, Femke (18) explains:

> It's true that it often portrays women in subordinate positions. But I don't find that a negative thing, because I know that I don't think about it [gender relations] that way. [...] In fact, I am usually the dominant person [in my relationships].

Femke's explanation shows that even when young people feel inspired by sexually explicit materials, this does not mean they are uncritical about the activity or its underlying assumptions.

Using the Internet and social media to build sexual knowledge has several advantages for young people. The first of these is that online, a vast amount of information from a multitude of perspectives is available. This information remains available over a more or less extended period of time, enabling young people to find content at their own pace, and to engage with content multiple times if that is needed.

Secondly, content and sources may be discovered that are not easily found offline, such as experiences, feelings and opinions of (specific) other people: 'Via Tumblr, you can get into contact with people whom you would never meet offline' (Hanneke, 16). This was especially mentioned by young people from minority groups, such as LGBT or strongly religious youth.

A third advantage of the Internet and social media is that they afford building knowledge without having to ask other people for help. This is especially appreciated when questions are considered 'embarrassing', says Jim (14): 'Some things I can discuss with my parents, but others I'd rather keep to myself. Those are the ones I look up on the Internet'. What exactly constitutes an 'embarrassing' topic differed widely among research participants.

A fourth advantage of the Internet and social media is the opportunity to remain (partly) anonymous. Kyra (15) described a visit to her General Practitioner (GP), together with her mother:

> I was at the GP for my eyes, and we also asked about the [contraceptive] pill. But it was so awkward, because there was also an assistant. They asked: why do you want the pill? And I mentioned the advantages: less acne, less heavy periods. Then she asked: not for preventing pregnancy? And my mother was sitting next to me and I was like: don't ask that question! Shut up!

Offline, Kyra felt embarrassed discussing contraception with not only her GP, but also an assistant and her mother. She felt much better when chatting with a professional via text messages on Sense.info. The difference between the two conversations was not just about anonymity, but also about (lack of) face-to-face contact, said Kyra's boyfriend Mark (17): 'You don't see each other, you don't hear each other, you can be completely yourself'. This feeling was shared widely among research participants: 71% of all survey respondents indicated that they dared saying (or typing) more via social media.

Most research participants were involved not only in *taking* knowledge from websites and social media, but also in *developing and spreading* knowledge about sexuality. Sometimes this was hegemonic knowledge, such as heteronormative and sexist jokes. But also 'alternative' knowledge was developed and shared. For example, several young people identifying as LGBT put great effort into sharing and mainstreaming knowledge about sexual diversity. This involvement in improving existing knowledge contradicts the depiction of the Internet and social media in educational policies as 'unsuitable' places containing 'bad' knowledge.

6.9 Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed how the 'empowerment through education' paradox plays out in Dutch sex educational policies. We demonstrated how educational policies allow only certain types of knowledge building to flourish, while inhibiting others, thereby hindering young people's sexual empowerment in terms of developing themes and priorities, finding different perspectives, setting the pace, and using different strategies for sexual knowledge building. Even though the Dutch system is highly regarded, our analysis shows that there is still considerable room for improvement. Young people's sexual empowerment would benefit from educational policies that are more sensitive to young people's own needs and strategies.

This is not a suggestion to abolish formal sex education. On the contrary: for many young people, formal education is an important part of their knowledge building process. Moreover, formal education can be crucial

for critically interrogating young people's ideas and practices; an essential element of empowerment. At the same time, we must be careful not to define adults as subjects of this interrogation and youth as the objects. Our research has shown that the tables might be turned sometimes, with young people critically interrogating adult knowledge.

We do argue that formal, adult centred sex education is only one aspect of young people's process of sexual knowledge building. Therefore, policies that are aimed at empowering young people should include by definition the support of young people's own ways of knowledge building, formal and informal, offline and online. The Internet and social media offer specific opportunities for building knowledge about a diversity of topics, from different perspectives, at different paces, anonymously and autonomously. Supporting young people's online activities entails more than providing them with 'good knowledge' stemming from certain adult experts; it also means facilitating young people's participation in a diverse range of networks and activities.

Empowering youth through sexual knowledge building therefore requires a cultural shift which involves both an openness to young people's experimentation, and a change in existing, age-based power hierarchies. Moreover, it is important for young people to have 'spaces of their own' for sexual knowledge building. As we have shown, the absence of the adult gaze can be crucial for certain online and offline practices of sexual knowledge building, such as anonymous learning, learning through practical experience, and to some extent learning from peers. These conclusions are relevant not only to our case study of the Netherlands, but also to policy makers, politicians, researchers, professionals and activists in other countries who are interested in young people's sexual empowerment, sex education and sexual knowledge building.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

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7.1 Introduction

In popular and academic discourse about youth, sexuality and social media, there is an overwhelming focus on risk and harm, which has resulted in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices being condemned, policed and pathologised (Renold, Ringrose, and Egan 2015). At the same time however, young people themselves are enthusiastically integrating digital technologies into their daily lives, including their sexual lives, indicating that digitally mediated sexuality involves more than just risk and harm. With my research project, I aimed to explore this by analysing how young people enact sexuality in their social media practices. Based on my research data, I distinguished four main dimensions of digitally mediated sexuality: sexuality as (1) an adventure, (2) romantic intimacy, (3) identity performance and (4) sexual knowledge building.

This analysis was inspired by critical research, taking place at the intersections of media studies, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, gender studies, and queer studies, and based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch teenagers. I conducted one and a half years of mixed- and multi-method ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch young people aged 12-18 in 2013-2014. This consisted of participant observation in different online and offline spaces such as schools, public transport, national meetings of Gay Straight Alliances, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr and WhatsApp; 6 focus group meetings; 2 group interviews; 29 individual and duo-interviews; and a survey with 679 respondents. Combining online and offline participant observation was useful for building trust and rapport with research participants, gaining access to more 'private' online spaces and practices, and for developing a thorough and contextualised understanding of young people's sexual experiences. Data collection and analysis were inspired by the grounded theory approach, meaning that data collection and analysis constantly informed each other, with the aim of identifying categories and concepts that can be connected into theories, in this case a theory about four main dimensions of digitally mediated sexuality.

In this concluding chapter, I will return to the three sub-questions that guided my study, outline the thesis' theoretical and societal contribution, and reflect on possibilities for future research. First, I will return to the three

sub-questions, and analyse (1) which main dimensions of sexuality can be distinguished in young people's digitally mediated practices, (2) how the enactment of sexuality is related to the performance of multiple, interfering axes of social difference, and (3) how young people perceive and construct social media in terms of their perceived affordances and qualities, and how these constructions interact with the construction of sexuality.

7.2 Dimensions of sexuality

In dominant academic and popular discourse about youth, sexuality and social media, sexuality is often defined as a specific set of practices that is conceptualised as 'risky' or 'harmful', which narrows our view and forecloses any investigation into young people's motivations for participating in a multitude of practices, the chances and challenges that are involved, and the different outcomes of the practices. In this thesis, I chose another approach of sexuality as a broad, multifaceted and multilayered concept that includes personalised sexual feelings and desires, social ideologies and practices of kinship, gender relations and reproduction, power relations, symbolic meanings of gender, and moral discourses (Spronk 2012). I investigated which elements played a role in young people's social media practices, and how these contributed to the enactment of multiple dimensions of sexuality.

Based on my analysis of the themes and experiences brought up by research participants, as well as a critical analysis of the themes and experiences that played a role in popular and academic debates about youth, sexuality and social media at the time of my study, I distinguished four main dimensions of sexuality: sexuality as adventure, romantic intimacy, identity performance and sexual knowledge building. Sexuality as an adventure refers to the mix of danger and pleasure that is often present in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices and in their reflections on those experiences. Sexuality as romantic intimacy refers to research participants' experiences with and reflections on love, romance, flirting and dating. The third dimension, identity performance, denotes research participants' reflections on the 'kind' of person they are, or want to be, in relation to digitally mediated sexual practices. The fourth dimension summarises research participants' practices of and references to sexuality as a process of knowledge building, which includes for instance looking up information, learning, asking questions and having conversations about sexuality. The labelling of these four dimensions is rooted in the sex-positive approach that guided this research project. With each of the concepts I aim to inspire an exploration of young people's motivations for participating in digitally

mediated sexual practices, their navigations of the chances and challenges that are involved, and their evaluation of the outcomes as pleasant and/or unpleasant. The four dimensions were introduced in chapter 2 and discussed in more detail in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

In chapter 3, I analysed digitally mediated sexual practices as adventures: experiences that involve uncertainty of outcome and therefore bring risk. Current conceptualisations of young people's digitally mediated sexual practices as 'risky behaviour' are problematic, because they reflect and reproduce a simplistic, false dichotomy of 'risky' versus 'safe' sexual practices. This denies the risks that are involved in so called 'safe' practices. For instance, defining conversations with strangers as risky and conversations with familiar people as safe ignores the fact that sexual violence is mostly committed by familiar people. Moreover, stereotyping particular practices as 'risky' can contribute to the stigmatisation of certain people and activities, as well as to victim-blaming in sexual violence cases. Through an interdisciplinary interaction between critical sociocultural studies of risk, feminist theory and adventure studies, chapter 3 explores the advantages of conceptualising young people's digitally mediated sexual practices as 'adventures' rather than 'risky behaviour'. Through an interdisciplinary interaction between critical sociocultural studies of risk (e.g. Lyng 1990; Lyng and Matthews 2007; Hart 2017), feminist theory (e.g. Franke 2001; Tulloch and Lupton 2003; Dean 2008; Newmahr 2011; Gregori 2013; Khan 2014; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015) and adventure studies (e.g. Priest and Gass 2005; Black and Bricker 2015; Russell and Gillis 2017), chapter 3 explores the advantages of conceptualising digitally mediated sexual practices as 'adventures' rather than 'risky behaviour'.

As is shown in chapter 3, my adventure approach has three advantages. First, it allows us to distinguish an activity's risks from its outcomes. Rather than equating risk with unpleasant outcomes, and safety with pleasant outcomes, the adventure approach conceptualises sexual adventures as taking place at the intersection of two different continua: risky versus safe, and pleasant versus unpleasant. This does more justice to young people's experiences of 'risky' practices resulting in pleasant outcomes such as fun, friendship, and love, as well as experiences of 'safe' practices resulting in unpleasant outcomes such as boredom. Second, approaching digitally mediated sexual practices as adventures also means recognising risk as a potentially constructive force that may contribute to feelings of accomplishment and pleasure. For instance, for several young people the 'risk' of seeing naked men is precisely what makes it so much fun to participate in Chatroulette conversations. Third, the adventure approach acknowledges that definitions of which risks matter (most), as well as

evaluations of the level of pleasure and the level of risk, are subjective and dynamic. For that reason, it is impossible to establish static, a priori definitions of pleasure and risk in young people's digitally mediated sexual experiences. The concept of sexuality as an 'adventure' instead of 'risky behaviour' thus helps to do more justice to the complexities, multiplicities and contradictions involved in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices.

Chapter 4 discusses romantic intimacy as a second dimension of sexuality. The role of social media in teenagers' romantic relationships is hardly a topic of academic interest, and empirical studies about this topic are scarce (exceptions being Pascoe 2010; Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015), which may be related to a history of adolescent romantic relationships not being taken seriously as well as to present-day public and academic rhetorics about digitally mediated forms of intimacy 'not being real', 'not really counting' or being 'difficult' to establish. These ideas are challenged however by research showing that (adult) people are using social media for a range of intimate practices, with studies exploring intimacy not just in relation to sexuality, friendship, and family relations, but also in relation to themes such as politics, identity, activism, empowerment, and work relations (e.g. Doorn 2009; Gershon 2010; Hjorth and Lim 2012; Lambert 2013; McGlotten 2013; Albury and Byron 2016; Attwood, Hakim, and Winch 2017). Studies about teenagers' digitally mediated intimate practices similarly focus on non-romantic intimate relations such as friendship and family ties (e.g. Donath and boyd 2004; boyd 2008b; Livingstone 2008; Ito et al. 2010; boyd 2014; Chambers 2017), sexual practices such as 'sexting' (e.g. Graaf et al. 2012; Mitchell et al. 2012; Ringrose et al. 2012; Lenhart 2013; Harvey and Ringrose 2015) or sexual identity (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes 2004; Ridder and Bauwel 2013), especially in relation to queer young people (Pullen and Cooper 2010; Pullen 2014). This indicates that contrary to pessimistic ideas about the effect of social media on intimacy, social media can contribute to different types of intimate practices and relationships.

My chapter explores how social media are used by teenagers to create, enhance and protect intimacy in their romantic relationships. Rather than providing a complete overview of young people's digitally mediated romantic practices like in the studies conducted by Lenhart, Anderson and Smith (2015) and Pascoe (2010), I zoom in on two specific practices: online intensive conversations and online public displays of love, and explore how these are related to the performance of intimacy as defined by Miller (2013). I explain how through their intensive conversations and public displays of love, romantic partners can contribute to all six qualities of intimacy distinguished by Miller: they can become more knowledgeable about each other, exchange care and affection, perform commitment, create mutuality, and build trust

and interdependency. For most research participants, both online and offline activities contributed to the performance of intimate romantic relationships, and online flirting and dating activities were regarded as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, offline romantic practices.

Young people's options to profit from the chances afforded by social media for building romantic intimacy are influenced by several challenges: the complexities of new technologies and new social norms about how to use these media; potential problems caused by the 'absence' of bodies; and restrictive social norms about sexuality. For instance, girls may feel reluctant to engage in intensive private conversations out of fear for being labelled as a 'slut', and teenagers who are involved in non-normative relations may not dare to publicly display their love in anticipation of potential negative reactions. Moreover, opportunities for creating intimacy are closely related to the perceived private or public character of online spaces. Intimacy is not confined to spaces that are typically regarded as private however, as is so often asserted in dominant discourses about intimacy. To the contrary: both spaces that are constructed as private and spaces that are constructed as public, as well as spaces that are constructed as ambiguous, can contribute to the enhancement of intimacy in teenagers' romantic relationships.

Chapter 5 analyses sexuality as a process of identity performance. It focuses on girls' practices of making, sharing and discussing 'sexy selfies'. These practices have become highly politicised in present-day discourses, where the pictures are being associated with risks such as bullying, harassment, blackmailing and sexual violence, with psychological problems such as narcissism and body dysmorphia, and with girls' and women's presumed 'sexualisation', objectification and commodification. Very few studies have involved teen girls' own reflections on sexy selfies, or sexiness in general. Studies that did include teen girls' voices revealed that girls navigate sexiness in ways that both challenge and reproduce contemporary discourses (Ringrose 2008; Duits and Zoonen 2011; Jackson and Vares 2011; Ringrose 2011; Ringrose et al. 2013; Jackson and Vares 2015; Ringrose and Harvey 2015b; Lamb and Plocha 2015; Lamb et al. 2016). Moreover, these studies pointed out that through their navigations of sexiness, girls perform gendered sexual identities.

In my chapter, I argue that through their navigations of multiple, contradictory discourses about sexiness, girls perform not only gender and sexuality, but also other intersectional identities. These identities are related to conventional axes of social differentiation, such as ethnicity, class, educational level, religion, but also to less familiar axes such as smartness, maturity, and popularity. Moreover, girls' navigations and identifications interact with the materiality of their bodies, their perceived social position,

and the specific context in which the topic is being discussed. My findings indicate that a focus on 'sexy selfies' as 'simply' a matter of sexual seduction, narcissist vanity, insecurity, or self-objectification is extremely limited and ignores the link between sexiness, multiple interfering social categorisations, and intersectional identities. Acknowledging these interconnections can create promising opportunities for interrogating social norms, stereotypes and power inequalities. Moreover, based on my analysis, I propose to use the concept of smartness in addition to educational level, and that of maturity in addition to age, much like we use gender in addition to sex, in order to advance a social constructionist analysis of young people's navigations of sexy selfies, sexiness and sexuality.

Chapter 6 concerns sexuality as a process of sexual knowledge building. Based on insights from the field of critical pedagogy (e.g. Freire 2005 [1970]; Ellsworth 1989; Gore 1990) and especially critical analyses of sex education (Allen 2005; Rofes 2005; Rasmussen 2006; Allen 2011; Ringrose 2013), this chapter explores whether Dutch sex education policies stimulate young people's empowerment through sexual knowledge building. It becomes clear that even though the Netherlands are generally applauded for their comprehensive, liberal, positive, and empowering approach of youth sexuality, there is still considerable room for improvement. Sex education is conceptualised as a highly standardised process in which certain adults provide young people with a certain type and amount of knowledge at a certain moment in time and in certain ways. Dutch sex education policies thus allow only certain types of knowledge building to flourish, while inhibiting others. This limits young people in developing their own themes and priorities, finding different perspectives, setting the pace, and using different strategies for sexual knowledge building; all elements that are necessary for any empowerment project to be effective, as argued by Rowlands (1997).

My data show that young people (want to) build knowledge about a wide variety of topics, from different perspectives, at different paces, and through different strategies. The Internet and social media were considered by research participants as especially useful, because online platforms can function as a gateway to a wealth of knowledge that may not be accessible offline. The Internet and social media were said to make it easier to find peers' perspectives and opinions, as well as experiential knowledge about 'embarrassing' or 'sensitive' topics. Moreover, this knowledge can be accessed at any time, in any pace, and this can be done anonymously and autonomously. In order to facilitate young people's sexual empowerment, educational policies should be more sensitive to young people's own needs and strategies, and include young people's own ways of knowledge building, formal and informal, offline and online.

7.3 Making and unmaking differences and similarities

The second sub-question asked how the enactment of sexuality is related to the performance of multiple, intersecting axes of social difference. Rather than categorising young people *a priori*, as is often done in academic research and popular discourse, in my research I analysed which differences and similarities come to matter to whom in which circumstances, and how they are produced in interaction with dominant discourses of social difference. This approach resulted in a more dynamic understanding of young people's identity work.

With regard to age, it became clear especially in chapter 3 and 6 how young people are often constructed as immature, risk prone, impulsive and irrational, and thus in need of extra care, protection, and/or regulation. For instance, in chapter 3 I explained how the concept of 'risky behaviour' (e.g. Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter 2010) permeates research about young people's digitally mediated sexual practices, resulting in a repressive climate that includes for instance disproportionate legal actions against sexting as a form of 'child pornography'. In chapter 6, I explored how adult-centred sex education policies, based on standardisation and hierarchical notions of teacher and student, prevent young people from exploring and developing their own knowledge building practices at their own pace. Also young people themselves sometimes reproduce dominant notions of youth and sexuality, as was demonstrated for instance in chapter 6 by a girl who used her 'young age' as a reason for not obeying religious rules about chastity, thereby reproducing dominant discourse and constructing herself as 'young', 'immature', and 'impulsive'. On the other hand, research participants also challenged these dominant notions, for instance by performing maturity through the rejection of sexy selfies (chapter 5).

Next to age, several other interfering axes of social difference are reproduced both in dominant discourses and in young people's discourses and practices regarding sexuality and social media. These are familiar axes such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, educational level and religion, but also axes that have remained undertheorised in previous research: maturity, smartness and popularity. Gender is reproduced for instance through warnings aimed at girls not to behave 'overly sexual' or 'sexy', and through condemnations of their sexual activities (chapter 2, 3, 4, 5), as well as through the rejection of boys' 'overly romantic' behaviour (chapter 4), and through the custom of separating girls and boys in sex education classes (chapter 6). Sexuality, and more specifically heteronormativity, is reproduced through explicit and overt cases of homophobia (chapter 2, 4), but also through daily interactions that reproduce heterosexuality as the standard, such as

'postfeminist' encouragements aimed at girls to perform heterosexiness (chapter 5), sex education that focuses on heterosexual, penetrative, reproductive sex (chapter 6), and interactions among friends that assume people to be attracted to 'the opposite sex', such as discussions about the attractiveness of profile pictures (chapter 5), girls' practices and conversations involving interactions with 'dirty men' online (chapter 3), and the online public display of heterosexual romance (chapter 4). All these practices contribute to the reproduction of heteronormativity and the exclusion and invisibility of queer young people. Ethnicity is reproduced through worries about 'deviant' or violent sexual practices, that are mainly associated with non-western immigrants (chapter 1), through negative reactions on mixed-race romantic relationships (chapter 4), and through girls constructing sexiness as a marker of ethnic identity (chapter 5).

Chapter 5 describes how such enactments of multiple social differences 'interfere' (Moser 2006), and how the enactment of one difference may reinforce another difference, but can also downplay it. For instance, for girls who were enrolled in a higher educational level, the rejection of sexiness and sexy selfies could function as a way of performing higher educated, higher class and smart femininity. In these instances, educational level, class and smartness reinforced each other. For girls enrolled in 'lower' educational levels, this was more complicated, as they were unable to profit from common associations between higher education, higher class, and smart identities. Nevertheless, some of these girls still claimed smartness through a rejection of sexy selfies, thereby downplaying or even un-making their 'lower' educational level. This chapter also explains how these processes of identity performance are complex interplays between girls' navigations of dominant discourses about sexiness, the materiality of their bodies, their perceived social position, and the specific context in which the topic is being discussed.

Throughout this thesis, it was demonstrated that norms and expectations related to social categorisations are not just confirmed and reproduced, but also challenged through young people's practices of making and unmaking differences and similarities. Stereotypical ideas about young people being immature, risk prone and irrational were found to be challenged by research participants' careful navigations of risk and safety: their efforts to select the best medium for experiencing sexy adventures based on criteria such as anonymity (chapter 3); their investment in background checks on potential romantic partners (chapter 4); their thorough reflections on whether or not to make and share a sexy selfie (chapter 5); their search for the safest spaces to build sexual knowledge (chapter 6). Moreover, research participants challenged the association between young age and immaturity,

and interpreted practices such as the public display of a serious romantic relationship (chapter 2, 4), the rejection of 'sexy selfies' (chapter 5), or the performance of sexual self-confidence (chapter 5) as markers of maturity.

Also other dominant norms and expectations were challenged, most notably norms and expectations related to gender and sexuality. With regard to gender, some girls for instance rejected the double sexual standard and reclaimed the right to express pride of their bodies through the performance of sexy femininity without being labelled a 'slut' (chapter 5). On the one hand, such performances of sexiness challenge moralistic and gendered norms that encourage sexual 'modesty' in girls. On the other hand, they can also be read as a reproduction of post-feminist discourses, which under the pretext of 'sexual freedom' call upon girls and women to produce themselves in a particular way, namely as desirable, heterosexy subjects.

Heteronormativity was challenged by queer young people for instance through their activities with regard to producing, sharing and mainstreaming knowledge about non-normative sexualities (chapter 2, 6) and by publicly performing queer relationships (chapter 4). For instance, chapter 2 discusses the case of a girl who created a YouTube video about her 'coming out' as a lesbian, and who promoted this video on her Tumblr page, thereby offering support to other lesbian girls and sharing knowledge about sexual diversity with a large audience. Chapter 4 mentions young people in same-sex relationships who make their relationship public, in spite of the danger of negative reactions and even violence, thereby creating more visibility for romantic and sexual diversity. The courageous work of these young people works to interrogate heteronormative structures in present-day Dutch society.

7.4 The co-construction of sexuality and social media

The third sub-question concerned how young people perceive and construct social media in terms of their perceived affordances and qualities, and how these constructions interact with the construction of sexuality. First of all, my study contributes to the disruption of simplistic dichotomies regarding social media, such as dangerous versus safe, bad versus good, online ('virtual', 'digital') versus offline ('real'), and public versus private.

Social media cannot be labelled as simply 'dangerous' or 'safe', 'bad' or 'good', as has been argued before (e.g. Hasinoff 2015; Karaian and Van Meyl 2015): young people engage in a wide variety of practices, and these practices are dynamic, complex, subjective and sometimes contradictory constellations of risk, safety and pleasure. For instance, engaging in a WhatsApp conversation may be experienced as 'safe' because of the privacy

the application affords, especially when it concerns a conversation that is stigmatised in society such as same-sex or socially mixed flirting, but the unwanted solicitations of an uncle or the unwanted spreading of private materials may change this and make the application (also) feel 'dangerous'. The same applies to the dichotomy of social media being either bad or good. A group of peers engaging in online conversations with strangers as a way of spending time together, for instance on Chatroulette, may label that medium as 'good', also (or especially) when the conversations involve 'dirty men', whereas a young person who encounters such 'dirty men' while hoping to find a romantic partner may consider this medium to be 'bad'.

Moreover, my research confirms earlier critical studies of youth, sexuality and social media (e.g. boyd 2008a; Doorn 2009; Warfield 2016) in demonstrating that young people's online experiences are no less 'real' than their offline experiences, if we can even separate the two spheres. The list of very 'real' online-offline entanglements is endless: WhatsApp conversations with potential lovers and romantic partners are discussed with friends in class; a picture taken on the beach becomes a Facebook profile picture, and is then debated in the school canteen; classmates' outfits are analysed and evaluated over Skype. Online and offline worlds are interwoven, and neither of these is more real than the other.

Regarding the public-private dichotomy, my study challenges dominant constructions of social media as merely 'public' (see also Pascoe 2010; Hjorth and Lim 2012). Privacy and anonymity play a major role in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices, and social norms about how to safeguard these are already being developed and implemented by young people (chapter 3, 4). Moreover, the 'public intimacies' discussed in chapter 4 show that intimacy is not confined to spaces that are typically regarded as private, as is so often asserted in dominant discourses about intimacy.

Moving beyond these dichotomies, this thesis provides a nuanced account of social media's role in young people's sexual practices. It has become clear that on the one hand, social media's impact on youth sexuality should not be overestimated: young people's digitally mediated sexual practices are still highly recognisable in terms of the activities that are undertaken, such as experiencing sexual adventures, building intimate romantic relationships, performing identities, and building sexual knowledge; the feelings that are involved, such as excitement, boredom, love, arousal, insecurity, fear, and joy; and the social conventions and norms that play a role, such as gendered sexual norms and heteronormativity.

On the other hand, social media also offer opportunities that are less accessible or unavailable offline, and my research shows that teenagers make creative use of these opportunities. One of these is the opportunity to

conduct conversations free of charge with people who are not physically near. This opportunity is used to conduct different types of conversations with different types of people via different media. These may be 'adventurous' conversations with random strangers via media such as Chatlokaal (chapter 2) or Chatroulette (chapter 3); 'informative' conversations with experts via media such as Sense.info (chapter 2), YouTube, Tumblr and Jongenout.nl (chapter 6); or 'intimate' conversations with potential lovers and romantic partners via media such as WhatsApp and Skype (chapter 4).

The choice to employ specific media for specific types of conversations is related to the perceived affordances of those media. In adventurous and informative conversations with strangers, anonymity often plays a crucial role, because it provides young people with a sense of safety that allows them to have these conversations. Remaining anonymous enables them for instance to talk with 'dirty men' without the risk of encountering these men offline, or to discuss sexuality with an expert without the 'embarrassment' of having to reveal one's identity.

In intimate conversations with romantic partners, anonymity is usually unimportant, which is reflected by and reinforced through the media that are typically used for these conversations: WhatsApp and Skype. Here, another affordance is more important: that of being able to interact with a partner 'anytime, anywhere', regardless of geographical distance, the presence of other people such as classmates, parents and teachers, and obligations such as school and sports training. This allows young people to create a connected presence that can contribute to the performance of intimacy within their romantic relationships.

An affordance that was considered as meaningful in relation to all three types of digitally mediated sexual conversations ('funny', 'informative' and 'intimate' conversations) was that of physical bodies remaining 'absent'; an affordance that has been discussed elaborately in media studies (e.g. Sundén 2003; boyd 2008a; Tuszynski 2008; Krotz 2014; Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith 2015). Even though research participants sometimes experienced this 'absence' as a challenge in terms of assessing a conversation partner's truthfulness, interpreting their messages, controlling other people's access, and influencing a conversation partner's involvement, they also experienced it as a chance to hide uncertainty or discomfort, which may result in conversations feeling 'easier' or 'sexier' online than offline, or to hide personal information about oneself that can result in conversations feeling 'safer' than offline.

Another opportunity is that social media enable young people to explore sexuality autonomously, without the interference of other people such as parents, teachers or even peers. Research participants found this valuable

for engaging in sexual adventures such as watching porn or talking with strangers about sex (chapter 3), performing a romantic relationship (chapter 4), experimenting with sexy selfies (chapter 5), or looking up information about sexuality that is considered 'embarrassing' or 'sensitive' (chapter 6), without the risk of condemnation, regulation or prohibition.

Furthermore, some social media such as Twitter and Instagram afford the exchange of information at a higher pace and on a larger scale than ever, and this information can remain available, searchable, replicable and visible over an extended period of time (see also boyd 2008b). On the one hand, research participants experienced this as a challenge, for instance because of the risk of sexy pictures being shared with unintended audiences, with possible negative consequences such as slut-shaming (chapter 3, 4, 5). On the other hand, as demonstrated in chapters 4 and 6, this affordance can also be experienced as a chance: a chance for instance to challenge social inequalities by sharing and mainstreaming 'alternative' sexual knowledge such as knowledge about sexual diversity (chapter 6). The persistence, searchability, replicability and visibility of social media content can thus be experienced both as a challenge and as a chance. Moreover, it is important to remain critical about these notions of persistence, searchability, replicability, and visibility. In some media contexts and practices, such as 'private' conversations on WhatsApp, Snapchat, Chatlokaal, or Sense.info, content can actually be less persistent and less public than offline. Here, it is the (semi-)privacy, (semi-)anonymity, and the non-persistent, non-searchable, non-replicable, and/or non-visible nature of the communication that facilitates new forms of communication such as experiencing sexual adventures, performing romantic relationships, performing identities, and building sexual knowledge.

My analysis of young people's navigations of social media's affordances also detailed how social media spaces and sexual practices are co-constructed. For instance, adventures with 'dirty men' can be fun because the adventures are mediated by media such as Chatroulette, an application that provides not only physical distance, but also anonymity, volatility and control; intimacy with romantic partners is encouraged by free, mobile chat services that are perceived as 'private' and 'intimate' as well as social networking sites that afford the integration of a partner into a public online profile; making and sharing 'sexy' pictures has become highly politicised under the influence of social media affordances enabling the quick and widespread distribution of ('private') images; and sexual knowledge building is enabled by the Internet and social media providing access to a vast amount of information and people, that can be accessed autonomously, anonymously, and without having to engage in face-to-face contact.

Vice versa, by (not) performing certain practices in certain online spaces, teenagers contribute to the construction of those spaces as sexy, exciting, intimate, informative, public and/or private, safe and/or dangerous, anonymous and/or not anonymous, socially inclusive and/or socially exclusive. For instance, through their creative ways of integrating romantic partners into profiles on social media such as Twitter and Facebook (chapter 4), research participants constructed these spaces as intimate, romantic spaces. In terms of the public/private quality of these spaces, young people's public displays of affection may on the one hand be interpreted as an 'annexing' of public space (Lambert 2013) through which these spaces are given a more private quality. On the other hand, as was discussed in chapter 4, public displays of affection were sometimes aimed at a larger audience, which contributes to the construction of these online spaces as public rather than private.

At the same time, the opportunity to publicly display affection is especially available to young people in normative relationships, and by publicly performing their relationships via media such as Twitter and Facebook, these young people reproduce the social exclusion of young people in marginalised (same-sex, socially mixed, Internet-based) relationships, and construct these spaces as socially exclusive spaces. While some marginalised young people have taken up the challenge of re-constructing these spaces, for instance by sharing information about sexual diversity, others have invested in creating 'a space of their own' that is experienced as more inclusive, more informative, and more safe, for instance on Tumblr, YouTube, and online forums and communities (chapter 6). Sometimes, this inclusive, informative, and safe quality of online spaces depends on anonymity: users feel free to participate only because they can remain anonymous, for instance by creating a profile that is unrecognisable for (specific) other people such as family members. This contributes to a construction of these spaces as not only inclusive, informative, and safe, but also anonymous. My analysis thus demonstrates how young people's sexual practices and social media influence each other: they are co-constructed.

7.5 Theoretical contribution

This thesis has been written in interaction with several academic fields. One of those is the field of psychology, which has dominated research about youth, sexuality and social media as discussed in chapters 1 and 2. Studies in this field have predominantly focused on a specific set of practices and outcomes, which has limited our view in terms of the practices that are considered relevant and the outcomes that have become known and imaginable, namely

negative effects such as sexual violence (e.g. Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter 2010; Jones, Mitchell, and Finkelhor 2012), sexual dysfunction and sex-addiction (e.g. Cooper 2000; Peter and Valkenburg 2008; Delmonico and Griffin 2012), and psychological problems such as narcissism (e.g. Korff-Sausse 2016; McCain et al. 2016). As a consequence of this predominantly negative conceptualisation of digitally mediated sexual practices, young people's activities are being condemned, policed and pathologised (Renold, Egan, and Ringrose 2015), and young people are considered 'irrational' or 'naive' for participating in these activities. Moreover, if something unpleasant or disturbing happens, victims are easily blamed for it, which can be a serious threat to their self-esteem and well-being, and keep them from seeking help (chapter 3). Therefore, it is important for psychological research about youth, sexuality and social media to include a wider variety of experiences, so that we can move beyond social media panic and develop a more sex-positive and empowering paradigm regarding digitally mediated youth sexuality. With my thesis, I offer a framework for such an expansion of psychological research with analyses of different types of sexy adventures, romantic intimacies, identity performances and sexual knowledge building.

Moreover, my analysis urges researchers within this field to abandon the false dichotomy of 'dangerous' versus 'safe' practices. For instance, my data show that labelling online conversations with strangers online as inherently 'dangerous' (e.g. Baumgartner, Valkenburg, and Peter 2010) does not do justice to the fact that this stranger may be an expert that can provide specific sexual knowledge, a peer that can offer lifesaving support, or a random Internet user that can brighten up a boring evening and that can easily be dismissed. Labelling other practices such as conversations with familiar people as 'safe' does not reflect the fact that sexual violence is often committed by familiar people, and that this may even be more disturbing for young people than violence committed by strangers (chapter 3).

Chapter 3 also makes clear that if digitally mediated sexual adventures and their risks are being studied, it is crucial to distinguish between potential risks of the activity and its outcomes: risky activities may result in pleasant outcomes. Moreover, these risks may be experienced as positive and productive by the young people involved in the activity, and young people's evaluation of the risks and pleasures of the activity may be different from the researcher's evaluation. For instance, the risk of peers finding out about sexual desires and preferences may feel as a bigger threat than a random stranger on Internet asking sexual questions. Such a more nuanced and complex conceptualisation of 'risk' should be central to future research about young people's digitally mediated sexual practices. As is discussed in chapter 3, conceptualising these practices as 'adventures' rather than 'risky

behaviour' can be fruitful for developing and implementing this more positive and balanced approach.

A second field of research that this thesis contributes to is the highly interdisciplinary field of critical research about youth, sexuality and social media, conducted at the intersections of media studies, sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, gender studies and queer studies. As is explained in chapter 2, this field of research seeks to disrupt and move beyond 'moral panics' about digital technology (Hasinoff 2015) and a prime way to do so is to study experiences of sexuality and social media from the perspective of young people themselves. In chapter 2, I distinguished two main approaches within this field: one that approaches the topic from a gender perspective, and one that approaches it from a queer perspective.

Gender researchers focusing on youth, sexuality and social media have predominantly focused on how young people, mainly girls, construct gendered sexual identities or subjectivities through practices such as creating profiles, using applications, sharing pictures, tagging, and commenting on peers' pictures (e.g. Ridder and Bauwel 2013; Ringrose et al. 2013; Albury 2015; Warfield 2016; Renold and Ringrose 2017). They explored how boys and especially girls navigate double sexual standards and slut-shaming in a 'postfeminist' context (Gill 2007a, 2009; McRobbie 2009), and demonstrated how young people's navigations of sexual norms both reproduce and challenge inequalities (Ringrose 2011; Dobson 2015).

The experiences of queer young people have not been researched to nearly the same extent as (assumed) heterosexual young people. There is an increase in studies recently (e.g. Hillier and Harrison 2007; Szulc and Dhoest 2013; Pullen 2014; Cho 2015; Albury and Byron 2016; Maliepaard 2017), although several of these studies also included adults and/or focused on 'older youth' rather than teenagers. This strand of research has made clear that for some queer young people, the Internet can be a 'haven' (Tropiano 2014) where they can become part of a larger queer community and explore sexuality. Queer studies researchers have included a wider variety of themes and practices in their analyses than gender studies researchers, including the use of social media for romantic practices and sexual knowledge building (e.g. Hillier and Harrison 2007).

My research builds on this interdisciplinary critical research, but also extends it in at least three ways: (1) by introducing a framework of four main dimensions of digitally mediated sexuality, (2) by introducing a reconceptualisation of young people's digitally mediated sexual practices as adventures, and (3) by adding multiple axes of social difference to the analysis of identity performance. I will discuss each of these contributions in the remainder of this section.

While critical studies of youth, sexuality and social media, especially those using a queer perspective, have discussed a variety of digitally mediated sexual experiences, these were not yet connected to a larger theory about the different meanings that sexuality can acquire in young people's lives. In this thesis, I introduced a model of four dominant dimensions of sexuality that are enacted through young people's practices: adventure, romantic intimacy, identity performance and knowledge building. This model can function as a starting point for future explorations of the rich field of (youth) sexuality and social media.

Moreover, this framework has brought to the fore that certain dimensions, such as identity (chapter 5), have received more academic attention than others, such as romantic intimacy (chapter 4). Especially in relation to teenagers, the latter dimension has hardly been investigated, while it is of crucial importance to young people themselves. This is contradictory to one of the major aims of critical research about youth, sexuality and social media: to make young people's voices heard. If this is taken seriously, then the topic of romantic intimacy should be taken into account. Chapter 4 of this thesis is a starting point, as it explores how young people use social media to engage in intensive private conversations and public displays of affection. These are only two aspects of a much wider variety of digitally mediated romantic practices though, that deserve more scholarly attention in order to understand the different ways in which social media can contribute to the performance of intimate relations.

Second, while critical scholars have already done major work in the reconceptualisation of young people as active agents rather than passive victims of technology, less attention has been paid to the reconceptualisation of young people's digitally mediated sexual *practices*, especially those practices that are typically labelled as 'risky'. As a consequence, these practices are still vulnerable to being stereotyped as 'risky' or 'bad'. As is argued in chapter 3, conceptualising these practices as adventures instead of 'risky behaviour' provides us with a positive framework that is based on the acknowledgement that 'risky' activities can have pleasant outcomes, that 'risk' can be a constructive force, and that 'risk' and 'pleasure' are subjective and dynamic concepts that should be investigated rather than assumed a priori. By introducing the concept of adventure, this thesis thus contributes to a more sex-positive and open approach towards young people's digitally mediated sexual practices.

Third, this thesis extends the critical study of youth, sexuality and social media by adding multiple axes of social difference to the analysis of identity performance. Previous studies have mainly focused on the ways in which young people perform gender and sexuality through their social media

practices. This thesis, most notably chapter 5, demonstrates that many more differences and similarities are made and unmade through practices such as making, sharing and discussing sexy selfies. Some of these constructions of differences and similarities follow conventional axes such as ethnicity, class and religion, whereas others follow less familiar axes such as popularity, educational level/smartness, and age/maturity. The performances of multiple differences interfere in complex and sometimes surprising ways, as is shown in chapter 5, which demonstrates the importance of an intersectional approach of youth, sexuality and social media.

All these axes of social difference, including those that are less familiar, should be analysed as social constructions. With regard to educational level for instance, this is often assumed to be an objective 'fact': one person is enrolled in vocational education, the other in education preparing for academic learning. For research participants however, there was more to it, and 'smartness' was considered as a performative accomplishment, that can be performed for instance through the rejection of sexy selfies. In a similar way, while 'age' may seem like a mere chronological 'fact', it is actually a social construct that can be accomplished (see also Laz 1998). For young people, this performative nature of age was captured in the concept of maturity. Therefore, based on my analysis, I propose to use the concept of 'smartness' in addition to educational level, and that of 'maturity' in addition to age, just like we use gender in addition to sex in order to emphasise that these are performative social constructions.

7.6 Societal contribution

In line with academic debates, also societal debates are dominated by a risk and harm approach of youth, sexuality and social media, which has resulted in young people's digitally mediated sexual adventures being condemned, policed and pathologised. This thesis broadens and nuances societal debates and challenges gendered, heteronormative stereotypes, such as stereotypes of young people as controlled by their hormones or brain, irrational, naive and/or irresponsible adults-in-the-making (with girls being stereotyped as vulnerable and boys as predatory); stereotypes of sexuality as a heterosexual, inborn, biological 'drive' located within individual people; and stereotypes of social media as an anti-social, dangerous force that threatens young people's well-being.

Based on my research among Dutch young people, I argue that the policing of digitally mediated sexuality limits young people's access to a diverse and complex array of experiences, through which they can explore

multiple dimensions of sexuality, ranging from adventure and romantic intimacy to identity performance and sexual knowledge building. The outcomes of young people's digitally mediated sexual practices may be pleasant and/or unpleasant, multiple and contradictory, and they may be defined and experienced differently by different people at different moments in time. I would therefore like to encourage parents, teachers, journalists, policy makers, police/justice officers and youth (health) workers to include such diversities and complexities in their discussions with and about young people. Thus, instead of advising young people not to participate in practices such as watching porn, sexting, and making selfies, it would be more empowering to discuss with young people all the dimensions, chances and challenges that may be involved in these practices. This would result for instance in media coverage of other topics than digitally mediated sexual violence, such as digitally mediated romance, digitally mediated sexual knowledge building, or digitally mediated activism. And rather than complimenting young people when they say they never take sexy pictures, parents and teachers might want to ask why that is, and how that may be related to sexual norms and inequalities like the sexual double standard.

With regard to risk, I advocate a careful analysis of which risks matter (most), according to whom, where these risks are located, and how they are experienced. For instance, contrary to popular notions, familiar people such as friends and family members may constitute a bigger risk than strangers; the risk of other people finding out about certain sexual desires or activities (and consequences such as slut-shaming, social exclusion, violence) may feel like a bigger threat than the risk of seeing a naked man online; and some risks like the latter may feel pleasant rather than unpleasant as is often assumed. Risk and pleasure are dynamic and subjective concepts that should be explored instead of assumed a priori. As was suggested in chapter 3, the concept of adventure might be a useful tool for furthering such a paradigm shift in discussions about risk and pleasure.

If we aim to empower young people, then young people's voices should play a more prominent role in discussions about digitally mediated sexuality. This requires a cultural shift which involves a change in existing, age-based power hierarchies, as is argued more elaborately in chapter 6, so that young people's experiences, feelings, opinions, dreams, fears and ideas are heard and taken seriously. Moreover, young people should have spaces of their own to engage in sexual practices on their own terms, following their own agenda. In practice, this could mean for instance that online forums and communities for young people, such as Jongenout.nl, are financially supported on a structural basis, so that young people have their own space for exploring

sexuality. Another example is the enrichment of educational materials with young people's own productions, such as YouTube videos created by young vloggers.

This is not to say that young people's ideas and practices should remain unquestioned. To the contrary: a central element of the empowerment of young people is that their ideas and practices are critically interrogated. This may result for example in discussions about risk that help young people to investigate which risks matter to them, and what kinds and levels of risk they regard as acceptable or pleasant in which circumstances. Also young people's practices and ideas that reproduce social inequalities (e.g. sexism, heteronormativity, racism, classism) should be questioned, in order to contribute to *all* young people's sexual empowerment.

In order to do this however, we need a shift away from individualising discourses about individual 'choice', 'wishes' and 'boundaries', towards a paradigm that acknowledges the wider social structures and inequalities that play a role in young people's sexual practices. Moreover, we must be careful not to assume adults as interrogating subjects and young people as interrogated objects. As described in chapter 6, young people can be as critical or even more critical about issues concerning sexuality and diversity than adults, and their considerations and arguments deserve to be taken seriously. Examples of research participants who actively interrogated adult knowledge and priorities are Cindy (15), who remembered to save her uncle's WhatsApp messages in which he sexually harassed her, and who asked me to integrate this advice into sex education (chapter 1 and 6), or the queer participants who participated in a range of online and offline activities to question the heteronormativity that was reproduced by adults, for instance through sex education (chapter 6). These young people had interesting ideas about which sexual knowledge they considered important, and impressive strategies for mainstreaming this knowledge. The Internet and social media offer specific opportunities for amplifying young people's voices (see chapter 6), and might thus constitute a promising venue for projects aimed at empowering young people.

7.7 Future research

In this thesis, I investigated how sexuality is enacted in Dutch young people's social media practices. Based on my analysis of research participants' experiences regarding sexuality and social media, I distinguished four main dimensions of sexuality, and how they are co-constructed together with multiple, interfering axes of social difference as well as with the (perceived)

affordances and qualities of social media. This analysis has resulted not only in the answers that are summarised in this chapter, but also in new questions.

For instance, I have distinguished four main dimensions of sexuality, which is based on my interpretation of previous critical studies of youth, sexuality and social media, as well as on my interpretation of my fieldwork data. As any categorisation, this distinction of four main dimensions of sexuality evokes new questions: does this categorisation also work in other contexts, and are there other dimensions that have not yet been addressed?

Moreover, each of the four dimensions deserves more investigation in terms of the sexual practices that are taken into consideration. Chapter 3 focuses mostly on watching sexually explicit materials and sexting, but an analysis of other digitally mediated sexual adventures, such as the use of dating apps, could provide more insight into which types of sexy adventures young people engage in and how they weigh and experience risk and pleasure in these adventures.

Chapter 4 discusses mostly digitally mediated conversations between (potential) lovers and public displays of love, thereby excluding other digitally mediated romantic practices such as meeting a partner or breaking up online. Analysing these practices could provide more insight into the different aspects of digitally mediated romantic intimacy, and young people's navigations of privacy and publicity in experiences of romantic intimacy. Chapter 5 focuses on girls' practices of making, sharing and discussing sexy selfies, and how these are part of the ongoing project of identity performance. Learning more about boys' and non-binary young people's experiences with sexy selfies would be interesting for gaining a better understanding of how sexiness is navigated by different young people in relation to different gender norms. Moreover, it would be instructive to analyse how other digitally mediated practices, such as online dating practices, are related to identity performance, and whether these dynamics are different from those related to sexy selfies. Chapter 6 discussed a range of knowledge building practices, including that of digitally mediated sexual activism. This could be explored in more detail however, as young people are quickly developing new and exciting ways of challenging sexual inequalities such as YouTube vlogging. Young people's, especially teenagers', digitally mediated activism for sexual equality and diversity has remained understudied (Harris 2010), although some studies have been conducted among 'older' youth (e.g. Jenzen and Karl 2014; Pullen 2014; Cho 2015; Powell 2015; Fotopoulou 2016). Moreover, additional research into the relationships between particular types of knowledge and particular knowledge building strategies might be helpful in defining more practical suggestions for possible improvements in sex education policies and practices.

Second, I have conducted this research in a specific geographical and historical context. All fieldwork was conducted in the Netherlands. Future research could investigate how the four dimensions of sexuality take shape in other countries, which would enable a critical analysis of claims about the Netherlands being one of the most liberal countries in the world with regard to youth sexuality. Moreover, most fieldwork for this study was conducted in 2013 and 2014, and, as Fotopoulou (2016) states: 'linear time is not friends with research about technological change'. Technology and social media are changing rapidly, and new practices, themes and norms develop while researchers are writing up their findings. For instance, the affordances of 'disappearing' Snapchat technology, released in 2011, seem to reshape memory and intimacy in youth sexual and relationship culture (Handyside and Ringrose 2017). While this was not a popular medium among research participants at the time when I conducted my fieldwork, it seems to have become more integrated now, which raises the question how this influences the different dimensions of youth sexuality. Also social norms regarding digitally mediated sexuality are developing and changing. For instance, at the time of my fieldwork, Internet-based relationships were looked down upon by a majority of young people (see chapter 4). This may have been related to the 'newness' of that phenomenon however, and now that Internet-based relationships are becoming more mainstream, young people's attitudes towards these relations may be changing.

Another possibility for future research would be to investigate in more detail present-day adult discourses and practices concerning youth, sexuality and social media. In chapter 1 and 2, I provided some general outlines of this discourse, and chapter 6 offers a more detailed analysis of sex educational policies, but these analyses could easily be expanded with analyses of other discourses and practices regarding youth, sexuality and social media, for example in online and offline sex education and/or media education, parenting, the media, the legal system and the health care system. This could be the starting point for a critical interrogation of adult reproductions of social media panic and sexual inequalities such as sexual double standards and heteronormativity. After all, deconstructing and dismantling these mechanisms, also among adults, is a crucial step in making sexy adventures available for all young people.

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Summary

Popular and academic debates about youth, sexuality and social media overwhelmingly focus on risk and harm, which has resulted in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices being condemned, policed and pathologised. This thesis is part of a small but growing body of literature that seeks to move beyond these 'social media panics' by empirically studying youth, sexuality and social media from the perspective of young people themselves. By providing a critical analysis of young people's experiences, this thesis challenges harmful stereotypes, such as the stereotype of young people being naive and irresponsible, the stereotype of sexuality as a heterosexual, biological 'drive' that is located within individual people and the stereotype of social media as a dangerous force that threatens young people's well-being. The aim of this analysis is to inspire a more nuanced and sex-positive debate that acknowledges both the chances and the challenges of social media in relation to multiple dimensions of youth sexuality.

This thesis investigates how young people enact sexuality in their social media practices. The analysis is based on one and a half years of ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch teenagers, consisting of online and offline participant observation, focus group meetings, interviews and a survey, as is discussed in more detail in chapter 1. Based on the research data, four main dimensions of digitally mediated sexuality are distinguished. Distinguishing these four dimensions allows for a discussion of the themes and experiences that are prominent in young people's daily lives, as well as themes and experiences that are highly visible in media reports, sex education and academic research about youth, sexuality and social media. The four dimensions of digitally mediated sexuality that are explored in this thesis are: sexuality as (1) an adventure, (2) romantic intimacy, (3) identity performance and (4) knowledge building.

Sexuality as an adventure refers to the mix of danger and pleasure that is often present in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices and in their reflections on those experiences. Sexuality as romantic intimacy refers to research participants' experiences with and reflections on love, romance, flirting and dating. The third dimension, identity performance, denotes research participants' reflections on the 'kind' of person they are, or want to be, in relation to digitally mediated sexual practices. The fourth dimension summarises research participants' practices of and references to sexuality as a process of knowledge building, which includes for instance looking up information, learning, asking questions and having conversations about sexuality. The labelling of these four dimensions is rooted in the sex-positive

approach that guided this research project. With each of the concepts I aim to inspire an exploration of young people's motivations for participating in digitally mediated sexual practices, their navigations of the chances and challenges that are involved, and their evaluation of the outcomes as pleasant and/or unpleasant.

The four dimensions are introduced in chapter 2. This chapter opens with a critical discussion of previous research about youth, sexuality and social media. It reflects on the dominance of psychological research which has informed many popular ideas about technological risk. This is followed by a discussion of critical, empirical studies that interrogate and challenge these ideas. Building on these critical studies, a case study then offers a thread for introducing the four different dimensions of mediated sexuality. Each of these dimensions is explored in more detail in chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Chapter 3 discusses digitally mediated sexuality as an adventure. As is shown in this chapter, current conceptualisations of young people's digitally mediated sexual practices as 'risky behaviour' are problematic, because they reflect and reproduce a simplistic dichotomy of 'risky' versus 'safe' sexual practices. This denies the risks that are involved in so called 'safe' practices. For instance, defining conversations with strangers as risky and conversations with familiar people as safe ignores the fact that sexual violence is mostly committed by familiar people. Moreover, it is argued that stereotyping particular practices as 'risky' can contribute to the stigmatisation of certain people and activities, as well as to victim-blaming in sexual violence cases. Through an interdisciplinary interaction between critical socio-cultural studies of risk, feminist theory and adventure studies, chapter 3 explores the advantages of conceptualising young people's digitally mediated sexual practices as 'adventures' rather than 'risky behaviour'.

My adventure approach has three advantages. First, it allows us to distinguish an activity's risks from its outcomes. Rather than equating risk with unpleasant outcomes, and safety with pleasant outcomes, the adventure approach conceptualises sexual adventures as taking place at the intersection of two different continua: risky versus safe, and pleasant versus unpleasant. This conceptualisation does more justice to young people's experiences of 'risky' practices resulting in pleasant outcomes, as well as experiences of 'safe' practices resulting in unpleasant outcomes. Second, the adventure approach enables an understanding of risk as a potentially constructive force, thereby acknowledging the feelings of accomplishment and pleasure that were brought up by research participants in relation to 'risky' practices. Third, the adventure approach acknowledges that definitions of which risks matter (most), as well as evaluations of the levels of pleasure and risk, are subjective and dynamic. The concept of sexuality as an adventure

instead of risky behaviour thus helps to do more justice to the complexities, multiplicities and contradictions involved in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices.

Chapter 4 discusses a second dimension of digitally mediated sexuality: that of sexuality as romantic intimacy. The role of social media in teenagers' romantic relationships is hardly a topic of academic interest, and empirical studies about this topic are scarce. Nevertheless, popular and academic debates are pervaded by pessimistic ideas about the effects of social media on intimate relations. Chapter 4 nuances this discourse by exploring how teenagers navigate social media's chances and challenges to create, enhance and protect intimacy in their romantic relationships. Zooming in on two specific practices, online intensive conversations and online public displays of love, the chapter shows how the use of social media can contribute to intimacy: partners can become more knowledgeable about each other, exchange care and affection, perform commitment, create mutuality, and build trust and interdependency. For most research participants, both online and offline activities contributed to the performance of intimate romantic relationships. Online flirting and dating activities were regarded as an addition to, rather than a replacement of, offline romantic practices.

Young people's options to profit from the chances afforded by social media for building romantic intimacy are influenced by several challenges: the complexities of new technologies and new social norms about how to use these media; potential problems caused by the 'absence' of bodies in digitally mediated communication; and restrictive social norms about sexuality. For instance, girls may feel reluctant to engage in intensive private conversations out of fear for being labelled as a 'slut', and teenagers who are involved in non-normative relations may not dare to publicly display their love in anticipation of negative reactions. Moreover, opportunities for creating intimacy are closely related to the perceived private or public character of online spaces. Intimacy is not confined to spaces that are typically regarded as private however, as is so often asserted in dominant discourses about intimacy. To the contrary: both spaces that are constructed as private and spaces that are constructed as public, as well as spaces that are constructed as ambiguous, can contribute to the enhancement of intimacy in teenagers' romantic relationships.

Chapter 5 discusses a third dimension of digitally mediated sexuality: that of sexuality as a process of identity performance. This chapter focuses on girls' practices of making, sharing and discussing 'sexy selfies'. These practices have become highly politicised in present-day discourses, where the pictures are often associated with negative phenomena such as sexual violence, psychological problems and (self)objectification. In chapter 5, I investigate

girls' navigations of sexy selfies as a process of identity performance. This chapter shows that by rejecting and/or embracing sexiness, and by labelling these positionings as markers of difference, girls perform complex intersectional identities. Axes of social difference that play a role in this process are not just the axes of gender and sexuality, which have been central to previous studies about sexy selfies, but also other axes. Some of these are well-known (ethnicity, class, educational level, religion), whereas others have remained largely invisible in previous studies of youth, sexuality and social media (smartness, maturity, popularity).

I argue in this chapter that acknowledging the interconnections between sexy selfies, social categorisations and identities can create promising opportunities for interrogating social norms, stereotypes and power inequalities. Moreover, based on my analysis, I propose to use the concept of smartness in addition to educational level, and that of maturity in addition to age, much like we use gender in addition to sex, in order to advance a social constructionist analysis of young people's navigations of sexy selfies, sexiness and sexuality.

Chapter 6 discusses a fourth dimension of digitally mediated sexuality: sexuality as a process of knowledge building. In this chapter, insights from the field of critical pedagogy are used to explore whether sex education policies in the Netherlands stimulate young people's empowerment through sexual knowledge building. It becomes clear that even though the Netherlands are generally applauded for their comprehensive, liberal, positive, and empowering approach of youth sexuality, sex educational policies do necessarily facilitate the sexual empowerment of young people. Sex education is conceptualised in these policies as a highly standardised process in which certain adults provide young people with a certain type and amount of knowledge at a certain moment in time and in certain ways. Dutch sex education policies thus allow only certain types of knowledge building to flourish, while inhibiting others. This limits young people in developing their own themes and priorities, finding different perspectives, setting the pace, and using different strategies for sexual knowledge building; all elements that are necessary for any empowerment project to be effective.

Indeed, my data show that young people (want to) build knowledge about a wide variety of topics, from different perspectives, at different paces, and through different strategies. The Internet and social media were considered by research participants as especially useful, because online platforms can function as a gateway to a wealth of knowledge that may not be accessible offline. The Internet and social media were said to make it easier to find peers' perspectives and opinions, as well as experiential knowledge about 'embarrassing' or 'sensitive' topics. Moreover, this

knowledge can be accessed at any time, in any pace, and this can be done anonymously and autonomously. In order to better facilitate young people's sexual empowerment, educational policies should be more sensitive to young people's own needs and strategies with regard to sexual knowledge building, and support young people's formal and informal, offline and online knowledge building practices.

Throughout the thesis, it is demonstrated how young people's digitally mediated sexual practices are intertwined with the making and unmaking of social differences related to age/maturity, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, educational level/smartness, religion and popularity. Sometimes, these processes of making and unmaking differences reproduced dominant categorisations, norms and expectations, and social media facilitated this for example by affording an increased visibility of normative relationships and mass distribution of gendered, heteronormative knowledge. Other times, young people's digitally mediated practices challenged dominant norms and expectations. For instance, stereotypical ideas about young people being risk prone and irrational were challenged by research participants' careful navigations of risk and safety. Moreover, research participants interrogated the association between young age and immaturity, and interpreted practices such as the public display of a serious romantic relationship, the rejection of 'sexy selfies', or the performance of sexual self-confidence as markers of maturity. Young people's digitally mediated sexual practices also challenged other norms and expectations, most notably those related to gender and sexuality, such as the double sexual standard and heteronormativity.

Moving beyond simplistic dichotomies about social media being either dangerous or safe, bad or good, online ('virtual', 'digital') or offline ('real'), and public or private, this thesis provides a nuanced account of social media's role in young people's sexual practices. It demonstrates that on the one hand, social media's impact on youth sexuality should not be overestimated: to a certain extent, young people's digitally mediated sexual practices resemble their 'offline' practices in terms of the activities that are undertaken, the feelings that are involved and the social conventions and norms that play a role. On the other hand, social media do offer new opportunities, such as the opportunity to conduct conversations free of charge with people who are not physically near; to remain anonymous in social interactions; to interact with other people 'anytime, anywhere'; to 'exclude' or 'hide' physical bodies from a conversation; to explore sexuality autonomously; and to exchange information at a higher pace and on a larger scale than ever, which may remain available, searchable, replicable and visible over an extended period of time.

Young people's experiences exemplify how social media spaces and sexual practices are co-constructed: the media influence their practices and

their practices influence the media. For instance, digitally mediated sexy adventures can be fun because the adventures are mediated by media such as Chatroulette, an application that provides physical distance, anonymity, volatility and control (see chapter 3). Vice versa, by (not) performing certain practices in certain online spaces, teenagers contribute to the construction of those spaces as (un)sexy, exciting and/or boring, intimate or distant, (un)informative, public or private, safe or dangerous, anonymous or not anonymous, socially inclusive or exclusive. For instance, as is discussed in chapter 4, through their creative ways of integrating romantic partners into their online profiles on media such as Facebook and Twitter, research participants construct these spaces as intimate and romantic. At the same time, these practices mainly increase the visibility of normative relationships, which contributes to a construction of these spaces as socially exclusive and reinforces the marginalisation of people in non-normative relationships.

This thesis contributes to several academic fields, in particular to psychology and to the highly interdisciplinary field of critical research about youth, sexuality and social media. While psychological studies of youth, sexuality and social media have mainly focused on a limited number of practices and outcomes, my research offers a model that facilitates the inclusion of a more diverse range of practices, including different types of sexy adventures, romantic intimacies, processes of identity performance and sexual knowledge building practices. Moreover, my analysis urges researchers within this field to abandon the dichotomy of 'dangerous' versus 'safe' practices. If digitally mediated sexual adventures and their risks are being studied, conceptualising these practices as 'adventures' rather than 'risky behaviour' can be fruitful for developing and implementing a more adequate, nuanced approach.

Moreover, this thesis intervenes in critical research about youth, sexuality and social media, in at least three ways. First, while critical studies have discussed a variety of digitally mediated sexual experiences, these were not yet connected to a larger theory about the different meanings that sexuality can acquire in young people's lives. In this thesis, a model of four dominant dimensions of digitally mediated sexuality is offered, which can function as a guide for future explorations. Second, while scholars have already done major work in the reconceptualisation of young people as active agents rather than passive victims, less attention has been paid to the reconceptualisation of their digitally mediated sexual practices. By introducing the concept of adventure as an alternative to 'risky behaviour', this thesis contributes to such a reconceptualisation, thus facilitating a more sex-positive and open approach towards young people's digitally mediated sexual practices. Third, this thesis extends the critical study of youth, sexuality and social media by adding

multiple axes of social difference to the analysis of sexuality as a process of identity performance. Next to gender and sexuality, several other axes are reproduced in young people's digitally mediated sexual practices: ethnicity, class, religion, popularity, educational level/smartness, and age/maturity. All these axes should be analysed as social constructions, and this thesis introduces the concepts of smartness and maturity to advance such a social constructionist analysis.

The most important societal contribution of this thesis is that it broadens and nuances societal debates about youth, sexuality and social media, which have been dominated by anxieties and stereotypes rather than actual experiences of young people. My analysis demonstrates that social media provide young people with access to a diverse and complex array of experiences, through which they can explore multiple dimensions of sexuality. Rather than condemning, policing or pathologising young people's digitally mediated sexy adventures, this thesis offers a framework for understanding young people's navigations of the chances and challenges that are involved, so that it becomes possible to communicate about the topic in a way that is more adequate and empowering for young people.

Samenvatting

Het maatschappelijke en wetenschappelijke debat over jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media richt zich vooral op mogelijke gevaren en eventuele schadelijke consequenties, met als gevolg dat de seksuele activiteiten van jongeren op sociale media worden veroordeeld, verboden en gemedicaliseerd. Dit proefschrift maakt deel uit van een groeiend onderzoeksveld dat deze 'paniek' rond sociale media wil doorbreken door het thema empirisch te onderzoeken, vanuit het perspectief van jongeren zelf. Op basis van een kritische analyse van de ervaringen van jongeren ontkracht dit proefschrift schadelijke stereotypen, zoals het stereotype van jongeren als naïef en roekeloos, het stereotype van seksualiteit als een heteroseksuele, biologische en individuele drift, en het stereotype van sociale media als een gevaarlijke kracht die het welzijn van jongeren bedreigt. Het doel van deze analyse is het stimuleren van een meer genuanceerd en sekspositief debat, dat zowel de uitdagingen als de kansen van sociale media erkent in relatie tot verschillende dimensies van seksualiteit.

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt hoe jongeren vormgeven aan seksualiteit via sociale media. De analyse is gebaseerd op anderhalf jaar etnografisch veldwerk onder Nederlandse tieners, bestaand uit online en offline participerende observatie, focusgroepbijeenkomsten, interviews en een enquête, zoals beschreven in hoofdstuk 1. Op basis van de data worden vervolgens vier hoofddimensies van 'digitaal gemedieerde seksualiteit' onderscheiden. Het onderscheiden van deze vier dimensies maakt het mogelijk om de thema's en ervaringen te bespreken die een prominente rol spelen in het dagelijks leven van jongeren, evenals de thema's en ervaringen die dominant aanwezig zijn in de media, seksuele voorlichting en in wetenschappelijk onderzoek naar jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media. De vier hoofddimensies van digitaal gemedieerde seksualiteit die centraal staan in dit proefschrift zijn: seksualiteit als (1) een avontuur, (2) romantische intimiteit, (3) identiteit en (4) een leerproces.

Seksualiteit als een avontuur verwijst naar de mix van gevaar en plezier die vaak onderdeel uitmaakt van de activiteiten van jongeren. Seksualiteit als romantische intimiteit verwijst naar ervaringen en ideeën van onderzoeksparticipanten met betrekking tot liefde, romantiek, flirten en daten. De derde dimensie, die van identiteit, betreft de vragen die jongeren zich stellen over wat voor 'soort mens' ze willen zijn en hoe ze daaraan vorm kunnen geven middels hun seksuele praktijken. De vierde dimensie verwijst naar seksualiteit als een leerproces, waaronder bijvoorbeeld zaken vallen als het opzoeken van informatie, leren over seks, vragen stellen en gesprekken

voeren over seksualiteit. De gekozen labels (avontuur, romantische intimiteit, identiteit, leerproces) zijn geworteld in de sekspositieve benadering die ten grondslag ligt aan het onderzoeksproject. Elk van de vier concepten biedt de ruimte om onderzoek te doen naar de redenen waarom jongeren sociale media gebruiken voor hun seksuele activiteiten, naar de manieren waarop ze omgaan met kansen en uitdagingen, en naar hun beoordeling van de uitkomsten als plezierig en/of onplezierig.

De vier hoofddimensies worden geïntroduceerd in hoofdstuk 2. Dit hoofdstuk opent met een kritische bespreking van bestaand onderzoek naar jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media. Er wordt gereflecteerd op de dominantie van psychologisch onderzoek, die van grote invloed is geweest op de hedendaagse conceptualisering van technologie als een gevaar. Daarop volgt een uiteenzetting over de kritische empirische studies die dit idee ter discussie stellen. Voortbouwend op deze kritische studies wordt vervolgens een casus besproken, die als rode draad dient om de vier hoofddimensies van digitaal gemedieerde seksualiteit te introduceren. Elk van deze dimensies wordt verder uitgewerkt in de hoofdstukken 3, 4, 5 en 6.

Hoofdstuk 3 bespreekt digitaal gemedieerde seksualiteit als een avontuur. Zoals duidelijk wordt in dit hoofdstuk, is de hedendaagse duiding van online seksuele activiteiten als ‘risicogedrag’ problematisch, omdat het een simplistische dichotomie van ‘gevaarlijk’ versus ‘veilig’ seksueel gedrag veronderstelt en reproduceert. Een dergelijke dichotomie gaat ten eerste voorbij aan de risico’s van zogenaamde ‘veilige’ activiteiten. Zo worden gesprekken met bekenden vaak als ‘veilig’ gezien en gesprekken met vreemden als ‘gevaarlijk’, terwijl het een bekend gegeven is dat seksueel geweld in veruit de meeste gevallen door bekenden wordt gepleegd. Ten tweede wordt duidelijk dat het stereotyperen van seksuele gedragingen als ‘gevaarlijk’ bij kan dragen aan de stigmatisering van bepaalde groepen mensen en activiteiten, en aan victim-blaming in het geval van seksueel geweld. Hoofdstuk 3 brengt sociaal-culturele studies over gevaar, feministische theorie en avontuurstudies met elkaar in gesprek en verkent aan de hand daarvan de voordelen van een benadering van online seksuele praktijken als ‘avonturen’ in plaats van ‘risicogedrag’.

Mijn avontuur-benadering kent drie voordelen. Ten eerste maakt de benadering een duidelijk onderscheid tussen de risico’s van een activiteit en de uitkomsten ervan. Dit doorbreekt de automatische associatie van risico’s met onplezierige uitkomsten en van veiligheid met plezierige uitkomsten. In plaats daarvan worden seksuele avonturen gezien als activiteiten die plaatsvinden op het kruispunt van twee assen: gevaarlijk versus veilig, en plezierig versus onplezierig. Dit doet meer recht aan de ervaringen van jongeren met ‘gevaarlijke’ activiteiten die leiden tot plezierige uitkomsten,

en ‘veilige’ activiteiten die leiden tot onplezierige uitkomsten. Ten tweede maakt de avontuur-benadering het mogelijk om gevaar te zien als een potentieel constructieve kracht. Dit biedt ruimte aan de gevoelens van plezier en vervulling die ter sprake werden gebracht door onderzoeksparticipanten als zij reflecteerden op ‘gevaarlijke’ activiteiten. Ten derde erkent de avontuur-benadering dat definities van welke risico’s er (het meest) toe doen, evenals evaluaties van plezier en gevaar, subjectief en dynamisch zijn. Het definiëren van seksualiteit als avontuur in plaats van risicogedrag helpt dus om meer recht te doen aan de complexiteit, verscheidenheid en tegenstrijdigheden die een rol spelen in de online seksuele activiteiten van jongeren.

Hoofdstuk 4 behandelt een tweede dimensie van digitaal gemedieerde seksualiteit: die van seksualiteit als romantische intimiteit. De rol van sociale media in de romantische relaties van jongeren was tot op heden nauwelijks onderwerp van wetenschappelijk onderzoek, en empirische studies over dit onderwerp zijn schaars. Desondanks overheersen in het maatschappelijke en wetenschappelijke debat pessimistische ideeën over de negatieve effecten van sociale media op intieme relaties. Hoofdstuk 4 nuanceert dit vertoog door te onderzoeken hoe tieners omgaan met de kansen en uitdagingen van sociale media om romantische intimiteit te creëren, te vergroten en te beschermen. Het hoofdstuk zoomt in op twee digitale praktijken, namelijk intensieve online gesprekken en online publieke uitingen van liefde, en laat zien hoe sociale media kunnen bijdragen aan intimiteit: via sociale media kunnen partners elkaar beter leren kennen, betrokkenheid en affectie uitwisselen, toewijding tonen, onderlinge verbondenheid creëren, wederzijds vertrouwen vergroten en vormgeven aan onderlinge afhankelijkheid. Zowel online als offline activiteiten droegen voor onderzoeksparticipanten bij aan romantische relaties. Online flirten en daten werd daarbij niet zozeer gezien als een vervanging van, maar meer als een aanvulling op offline romantische praktijken.

De mogelijkheden om sociale media te gebruiken voor het creëren van romantische intimiteit worden beïnvloed door verschillende uitdagingen: de complexiteit van nieuwe technologieën en nieuwe sociale normen over het gebruik van die technologieën; potentiële problemen veroorzaakt door de ‘afwezigheid’ van lichamen in digitale communicatie; en beperkende sociale normen rond seksualiteit. Meiden kunnen bijvoorbeeld terughoudend zijn in het aangaan van intensieve privégesprekken uit angst bestempeld te worden als ‘slet’, en tieners in non-normatieve relaties durven hun liefde soms niet publiekelijk te laten zien uit angst voor negatieve reacties. De mogelijkheden om intimiteit te creëren via sociale media worden ook beïnvloed door de manier waarop een online omgeving wordt ervaren: als publiek of privé. Het is echter niet zo dat intieme activiteiten enkel plaatsvinden via media die als privé worden ervaren, zoals vaak wordt aangenomen in het dominante

vertoog over intimiteit. In tegendeel: zowel ‘privé-omgevingen’ als ‘publieke omgevingen’, alsook ambigue omgevingen kunnen een rol spelen in de romantische, intieme praktijken van jongeren.

Hoofdstuk 5 bespreekt een derde dimensie van digitaal gemedieerde seksualiteit: die van seksualiteit als het vormgeven aan identiteit. Dit hoofdstuk focust op ervaringen van meiden met het maken, delen en bespreken van ‘sexy selfies’. Deze praktijken zijn sterk gepolitiseerd geraakt in het hedendaagse debat, waarin de foto’s vaak geassocieerd worden met negatieve fenomenen als seksueel geweld, psychologische problemen en (zelf)objectificatie. Hoofdstuk 5 maakt duidelijk dat meiden door het innemen van een goedkeurende, afkeurende of dubbelzinnige houding ten opzichte van sexy selfies vormgeven aan complexe, intersectionele identiteiten. Assen van verschil die hierin een rol spelen zijn niet alleen de assen van gender en seksualiteit, die reeds naar voren kwamen in eerder onderzoek over sexy selfies, maar ook andere assen. Sommige daarvan zijn bekend (etniciteit, klasse, opleidingsniveau, religie), terwijl andere tot op heden nog grotendeels onzichtbaar bleven in onderzoek naar jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media (slimheid, volwassenheid, populariteit).

In hoofdstuk 5 beargumenteer ik dat de onderlinge verbondenheid tussen sexy selfies, sociale categorieën en identiteiten veelbelovende mogelijkheden biedt om sociale normen, stereotypen en machtsongelijkheden ter discussie te stellen. Bovendien stel ik op basis van mijn analyse voor om gebruik te maken van het concept ‘slimheid’ naast opleidingsniveau, en ‘volwassenheid’ naast leeftijd, net zoals we gender gebruiken naast sekse, om bij te dragen aan een sociaal constructivistische analyse van jongeren, sexy selfies en seksualiteit.

Hoofdstuk 6 behandelt een vierde dimensie van digitaal gemedieerde seksualiteit: seksualiteit als een leerproces. In dit hoofdstuk worden inzichten uit de kritische pedagogiek gebruikt om te analyseren in hoeverre Nederlands beleid op het gebied van seksuele vorming bijdraagt aan de seksuele empowerment van jongeren. Het wordt duidelijk dat hoewel ‘de Nederlandse benadering’ van jongeren en seksualiteit internationaal bekendstaat als veelomvattend, liberaal, positief en ‘empowerend’, het Nederlandse beleid rond seksuele vorming niet noodzakelijkerwijs bijdraagt aan de seksuele empowerment van jongeren. Seksuele vorming wordt in dit beleid namelijk neergezet als een gestandaardiseerd proces waarin bepaalde volwassenen een bepaald type en bepaalde hoeveelheid kennis overdragen aan jongeren op een bepaald moment en op een bepaalde manier. Het Nederlandse beleid stimuleert daarmee een beperkt aantal vormen van kennisontwikkeling, terwijl het andere vormen belemmert. Het beperkt jongeren in het definiëren van eigen thema’s en prioriteiten, het vinden van verschillende perspectieven,

het bepalen van het tempo en het gebruiken van verschillende strategieën om seksuele kennis te ontwikkelen: noodzakelijke elementen voor elk project gericht op empowerment.

Mijn data laten zien dat jongeren kennis (willen) ontwikkelen over uiteenlopende onderwerpen, vanuit diverse perspectieven, in verschillende tempo's, en via verscheidene strategieën. Internet en sociale media werden door onderzoeksparticipanten ervaren als bijzonder nuttig, omdat online platforms kunnen fungeren als toegangspoort naar een rijkdom aan kennis die offline niet toegankelijk is. Volgens jongeren maken internet en sociale media het makkelijker om de perspectieven en meningen van leeftijdsgenoten te vinden, evenals ervaringskennis over 'gevoelige' of 'ongemakkelijke' onderwerpen. Die kennis is bovendien op elk moment toegankelijk en jongeren kunnen het zich in hun eigen tempo, anoniem en autonoom eigen maken. Om de seksuele empowerment van jongeren te stimuleren, zou beleid op het gebied van seksuele vorming meer rekening moeten houden met de behoeften en strategieën van jongeren zelf en ondersteuning moeten bieden aan formele en informele, online en offline leerpraktijken.

Uit de verschillende hoofdstukken wordt duidelijk dat jongeren middels hun digitaal gemedieerde seksuele praktijken sociale categorieën (re) produceren op het gebied van leeftijd/volwassenheid, gender, seksualiteit, etniciteit, opleidingsniveau/slimheid, religie en populariteit. Soms reproduceren jongeren hierbij dominante categoriseringen, normen en verwachtingen. Sociale media faciliteren dat bijvoorbeeld door de mogelijkheden die ze bieden om normatieve relaties nog zichtbaarder te maken en om gegenderde en heteronormatieve kennis op grote schaal te verspreiden.

Op andere momenten ontkrachten de activiteiten van jongeren echter de dominante normen en verwachtingen. Zo werden stereotypen over jongeren als roekeloos en onbezonnen weerlegd door de zorgvuldige afwegingen van onderzoeksparticipanten met betrekking tot de risico's die ze wilden nemen. Ook weerspraken jongeren de aanname dat volwassenheid gebonden is aan leeftijd: praktijken als het publiekelijk vormgeven aan serieuze romantische relaties, het afkeuren van 'sexy selfies' en het hebben van seksueel zelfvertrouwen werden uitgelegd als tekenen van volwassenheid. De digitaal gemedieerde seksuele praktijken van jongeren stellen ook andere normen en verwachtingen ter discussie. Dit zijn met name normen en verwachtingen op het gebied van gender en seksualiteit, zoals de dubbele seksuele moraal en heteronormativiteit.

Dit proefschrift overstijgt simplistische dichotomieën die sociale media weergeven als gevaarlijk of veilig, slecht of goed, online ('virtueel', 'digitaal') of offline, en publiek of privé. De genuanceerde analyse maakt

duidelijk dat de invloed van sociale media aan de ene kant niet overdreven moet worden: tot op zekere hoogte lijken de 'online' seksuele praktijken van jongeren sterk op hun 'offline' seksuele praktijken wat betreft de activiteiten die worden ondernomen, de gevoelens die daarbij komen kijken en de sociale normen en conventies die een rol spelen. Aan de andere kant bieden sociale media wel degelijk nieuwe mogelijkheden, zoals de mogelijkheid om gratis gesprekken te voeren met mensen die niet in de buurt zijn; om 'altijd en overal' met anderen te kunnen communiceren; om de zichtbaarheid van fysieke lichamen te beperken; om seksualiteit zelfstandig te onderzoeken; en om informatie uit te wisselen op ongekende snelheid en schaal, waarbij die informatie gedurende een langere tijd beschikbaar, doorzoekbaar, herhaalbaar en zichtbaar kan blijven.

De ervaringen van jongeren laten zien dat sociale media en seksuele praktijken co-constructies zijn: de media beïnvloeden de praktijken en de praktijken beïnvloeden de media. Het plezier van digitaal gemedieerde seksuele avonturen wordt bijvoorbeeld mede gecreëerd doordat ze worden beleefd op media zoals Chatroulette, een applicatie die fysieke afstand, anonimiteit, vluchtigheid en controle mogelijk maakt (zie hoofdstuk 3). Vice versa beïnvloeden de praktijken van jongeren de media: door bepaalde activiteiten (niet) te ontplooien in bepaalde online omgevingen, worden die omgevingen al dan niet sexy, spannend of saai, intiem of afstandelijk, leerzaam of nietszeggend, publiek of privé, veilig of gevaarlijk, anoniem of niet anoniem, inclusief of buitensluitend. Hoofdstuk 4 laat bijvoorbeeld zien hoe jongeren hun romantische partners integreren in hun online profielen op media als Facebook en Twitter, waardoor deze media-omgevingen een intiem en romantisch karakter krijgen. Tegelijkertijd worden hier vooral normatieve relaties zichtbaar gemaakt, waardoor deze media tevens een buitensluitend karakter krijgen dat de sociale marginalisering van mensen in non-normatieve relaties versterkt.

Dit proefschrift draagt bij aan verschillende wetenschapsgebieden. Ten eerste draagt het bij aan psychologisch onderzoek naar jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media, dat voornamelijk gericht is op een beperkt aantal praktijken en uitkomsten. Mijn proefschrift voorziet in een model dat ruimte biedt aan een veel breder scala aan praktijken, waaronder diverse soorten seksuele avonturen, romantische intimiteiten, processen van identiteitsconstructie en activiteiten rond seksuele kennisvergaring. Daarnaast doorbreekt mijn analyse de dichotomie van 'gevaarlijke' versus 'veilige' activiteiten die zo gangbaar is in psychologisch onderzoek. Het conceptualiseren van online seksuele praktijken als 'avonturen' in plaats van 'risicogedrag' kan bijdragen aan de ontwikkeling en implementatie van een meer adequate, genuanceerde benadering.

Ten tweede draagt dit proefschrift bij aan het interdisciplinaire veld van kritisch onderzoek naar jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media. Het proefschrift vult dit veld op zeker drie manieren aan. Allereerst hebben onderzoekers uit dit veld weliswaar diverse digitaal gemedieerde seksuele praktijken geanalyseerd, maar zij koppelden deze nog niet aan een bredere theorie over de verschillende betekenissen die seksualiteit kan krijgen in het leven van jongeren. Dit proefschrift biedt een model van vier hoofddimensies van seksualiteit, dat als kader kan dienen voor toekomstig onderzoek naar de verschillende digitaal gemedieerde seksuele praktijken van jongeren. Ten tweede is er binnen dit veld belangrijk werk verzet om jongeren te conceptualiseren als actieve actoren in plaats van passieve slachtoffers, maar is er minder aandacht besteed aan het herconceptualiseren van hun digitaal gemedieerde seksuele activiteiten. Met de introductie van het concept 'avontuur' als alternatief voor 'risicogedrag' biedt dit proefschrift een dergelijke herconceptualisering en stimuleert het een meer sekspositieve, open benadering van de digitaal gemedieerde seksuele activiteiten van jongeren. Ten derde draagt het proefschrift bij aan de kritische studie van jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media door meerdere assen van verschil toe te voegen aan de analyse van de manieren waarop jongeren vormgeven aan identiteit. Naast gender en seksualiteit spelen ook andere assen een rol, namelijk etniciteit, klasse, religie, populariteit, opleidingsniveau/slimheid en leeftijd/volwassenheid. Al deze assen moeten geanalyseerd worden als sociale constructies, en in dit proefschrift worden de concepten 'slimheid' en 'volwassenheid' geïntroduceerd om een dergelijke benadering te bevorderen.

De belangrijkste maatschappelijke bijdrage van het proefschrift is dat het een basis biedt voor de verbreding van het publieke debat over jongeren, seksualiteit en sociale media, dat nu nog gebaseerd is op angst en stereotypen in plaats van kennis over de daadwerkelijke ervaringen van jongeren. Mijn analyse laat zien dat sociale media toegang bieden tot een grote verscheidenheid aan ervaringen, waarmee jongeren vormgeven aan verschillende dimensies van seksualiteit. Dit proefschrift biedt een tegenwicht aan de veroordeling, onderdrukking en medicalisering van de digitaal gemedieerde seksuele avonturen van jongeren. In plaats daarvan biedt het een kader van waaruit we kunnen begrijpen hoe jongeren omgaan met de kansen en uitdagingen van sociale media, zodat het mogelijk wordt om over het onderwerp te communiceren op een manier die adequater is en bijdraagt aan de empowerment van jongeren.

Curriculum Vitae

Marijke Naezer was born in Deventer in 1982. She graduated in Cultural Anthropology at Radboud University Nijmegen in 2005 (MA, cum laude). Her thesis about nicknames and gender norms among Dutch youth was awarded with the professor Halkes Prize 2003-2005, and published in 2006. In 2007, she graduated in Women's Studies at Utrecht University (MA, cum laude). After graduation, she worked as a policy worker for the Dutch Women's Studies Association (NGV) and the Dutch Association Against Child Sexual Abuse (VSK). Moreover, she worked as an independent researcher and journalist focusing on themes related to gender and diversity; in particular (the long-term consequences of) domestic and sexual violence.

In October 2012, she started her PhD research about youth, sexuality and social media. In 2015, she was granted the Frye Stipend for promising young women researchers, which enabled her to spend time at the Institute of Education, University College London, as a visiting scholar. She publishes about her research in scientific and popular books and journals. Moreover, she participates in the KNAW-project *Faces of Science* and writes blogs, gives public lectures, participates in online and offline media productions, and advises professionals about issues related to youth, sexuality and social media. Additionally, she is a member of the advisory board of *Raffia*, an online magazine on gender, diversity and feminism. She currently works on two new research projects: one about harassment in academia, funded by the Dutch Network of Women Professors (LNVH), and one about perpetrators of shame-sexting, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security.

This thesis challenges common anxieties and stereotypes about youth, sexuality and social media. Based on one and a half years of online and offline ethnographic fieldwork among Dutch teenagers, it demonstrates how social media provide young people with access to a diverse and complex array of sexual experiences, shaping and transforming four dimensions of youth sexuality: sexual adventures, romantic intimacy, identity performance and sexual knowledge building. Rather than condemning, policing or pathologising young people's digitally mediated sexual practices, the thesis offers a framework for understanding young people's navigations of the chances and challenges that are involved.