SOCIETYNOW

SEX AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Katrin Tiidenberg &
Emily van der Nagel

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Tiidenberg and van der Nagel have crafted an engaging yet sophisticated introduction to the complexities of contemporary sexualities and social media. This book explores key theoretical concepts by means of concrete examples, foregrounding media users' own accounts of their explorations of digital intimacy and sexual self-expression. It is lively and easy to read without oversimplifying the complexity of platform policies, local regulatory systems, and the ways sex and gender politics play out among social media users. This book will be invaluable for researchers, students and practitioners in the fields of sexuality and gender studies, health promotion and education, media studies and internet studies.

Kath Albery, Professor of Media and Communication, Swinburne University of Technology, Australia

This is a wonderful book clearly outlining the ways that sex and social media increasingly intersect. It is both incisive and highly accessible and will be invaluable for scholars, students and all those with an interest in sex, society and media.

Feona Attwood, Editor, Porn Studies, Sexualities, and Professor of Cultural Studies Communication & Media, Middlesex University London, UK

Deep yet accessible, entertaining yet hugely informative, this book explores sex and social media in their startling complexity. It is compulsory reading for parents, educators, journalists, IT professionals and policymakers alike.

Susanna Paasonen, Professor of Media Studies, University of Turku, Finland

SEX AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Emily van der Nagel, PhD, is a Lecturer in Social Media in the School of Media, Film and Journalism at Monash University in Australia. She has been published in *M/C Journal: A Journal of Media and Culture*, *Media International Australia*, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, *Internet Histories*, and *First Monday*. Emily researches social media identities, platforms, and cultures. She tweets at @emvdn, and is online at http://emvdn.net/.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a book across the very different time zones of Estonia and Australia, to a tight deadline, about a topic that twisted in our hands like a snake as social media platforms radically changed their rules and users outraged, was no small endeavor, but it has been an incredibly enjoyable and endlessly fascinating process.

We'd like to thank the amazing Association of Internet Researchers, the incredible conferences of which brought us together, allowed us to discover each other's work, and finally led to us collaborating on this book. We are grateful to our colleague Dr Alexandra James, who read and commented on the manuscript – thank you for your keen eye, your attentive comments, and your enthusiasm. We are also very grateful to our wise, open-minded editor Jen McCall, a self-professed "prude," who nonetheless wanted our sex book. We love you Jen.

But more than anything we would like to thank our research participants – the fascinating, beautiful, brilliant, and kind people who gave us their time and their attention. You allowed us into your lives, your spaces, your communities. You welcomed us and talked to us. You showed us around and introduced us to others. Thank you! There would be no book, if it weren't for you, and we would personally be significantly more boring people. May the Patron Saint of

Nudes always smile upon you. We will keep fighting for the right to be sexy on social media.

Further, Kat would like to thank the precious colleagues researching sex and the internet for the inspiration, everyone she's met at an academic conference who did not make a funny face when she said she's been studying nudes, and of course, her husband and her son, for so graciously living with a partner/mother who writes. All the time.

Emily would like to thank her PhD supervisors Esther Milne, Anthony McCosker, and Rowan Wilken, for their guidance and care as she researched social media pseudonymity and Reddit Gonewild for her thesis, and her family's love, support, and enthusiasm for her work over the years: her parents Leanne and Andrew; sisters Nicole and Jo; and partner Dan.

INTRODUCTION

At one point when we were in the editing stages of writing this book, Kat, frustrated by the content moderation and community management policies of Facebook Inc, was searching for an alternative to Instagram. Kat has a private Instagram account that she mostly uses for sharing snapshots of everyday life with family and close friends. You know. A family album. A private album. So she typed: "best app for a private photo album" into Google and… immediately realized that a "private photo album" wasn't what she assumed. The first result from Google was from a 2019 news story comparing the best apps to hide – i.e., make private – the photos and videos on your phone.

Why would you want to do that? The rest of the search results explain. The second result was a link to a story titled: "Secret apps to hide private sexy pictures on your phone," and the third was: "6 secret apps to hide your sexy photos."

We've both been studying how, why, and where people share sexy photos for years, but we still find it noteworthy that "sexy pictures" has become a legitimate enough category of personal snapshot photography and smartphone use to

warrant development of new applications or new functionalities for our devices, and to take up the whole first page of Google search results. Nudes, it seems, are part of everyday life. Somewhat controversially then, various instant messaging apps and social networking platforms wherein these nudes are often edited and shared, have introduced a crop of changes, which are broadly unified by an attempt to push sex out. 2018 and 2019 saw Community Guidelines and Terms of Service rules of many social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr) updated to forbid sexual imagery, sexual talk, and even posts that combine certain emoji with certain sexual words (e.g., the eggplant emoji and the word "horny"). Elsewhere, whole sections of services were eliminated (e.g., the Personals on Craigslist). Together, these shifts stigmatize sexual imagery, sexual practices, and sex more broadly. Silicon Valley's contradictory take on sex is confusing enough: nudes are normal, but also more evil than any other content? Here we invite you to contemplate the amount of violence, vitriol, racism, political hatred, and misinformation you regularly encounter on most social media platforms. The situation only becomes more complicated when we add popular media coverage and actual people's lived experiences into the mix.

THIS IS WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

Sex is fascinating and important, and sometimes scary. Sex is a normal part of life. Yet, the multiplicity and richness of sexual practices on and with social media very rarely make it to everyday conversations. The nuances of how technology, practices, preferences, and perceptions are intertwined even less so. Public opinion construes sex on and with social media as deviant, risky, or something only teenagers do because they

don't know any better. Much of policy, news, and educational discourse is dominated by essentialist views of human sexualities; ignorant conceptualizations of the internet; and a long-standing tendency to stigmatize everything that falls outside of the neat hetero- and mononormative ideal.[1] Meanwhile, apps and digital services are advertised as a key resource for finding and doing sex. Finally, some academic scholarship has shown that sex on and with social media can allow people to create and playfully experiment with their identities, build meaningful relationships, accept themselves, and build communities.

Sex and Social Media hacks a path in this thicket to offer a curious reader a research-based, academically informed, yet accessible discussion on sex and social media. We explore how social media shapes sex; address the common misconceptions about social media sex; explain where and how social media sex happens, and what even counts as social media sex. We argue that understanding sex and social media is less about the who, where, and what of it – although these are important as well – and more about the struggles around norms, audiences, and contexts. Thus, we analyze sex and social media in the context of first, cultural norms; second, platform features, interfaces, and rules; and third, people's practices, relationships, and communities. In all of this, however, it is important to remember that sex (and social media) is also a matter of raced, gendered, sexually oriented, classed, differently able-bodied individuals, who experience

1 Heteronormativity can be defined as a set of cultural assumptions and norms that see human relationships through the binaries of male/female, gay/straights and position heterosexuality as well as masculine men and feminine women as the only viable options. Mononormativity is a similar set of assumptions that sees sexual and romantic relationship between only two monogamous partners as the only normal form of relationships.

the mentioned norms and platforms differently, and for whom different practices and relationships seem variably plausible, viable, or desirable.

To meaningfully discuss sex on and with social media, we first need to agree on what we mean when we say sex in this book, and what we mean, when we say social media.

WHAT IS SEX?

When we asked our friends – adults who have been "doing it" for years – "what is sex?," hilarity and confusion ensued. Does sex equal only sex acts, or does it cover the broader realm of sexually motivated activities and behaviors? And what qualifies as a sex act? Sexual intercourse, which some dictionaries suggest is synonymous with sex, seems to presume penetration. Most of our friends were content to include nonpenetrative acts within what counts as sex. But how far does that stretch? Do sex acts presume co-present physical bodies touching each other? Touching where? How intently? With what results? Does touching with toys count? What about remote-controlled toys? What about masturbation? Is it still sex when there is no consent? Does motivation matter? What about pleasure?

Existing research does not get us to the perfect definition, in the sense of one that lists the conditions that are applicable to all sex acts and sex acts only (and not other stuff, like doctors' visits or artistic performances). It does, however, highlight the malleability of people's sexual semantics. Stephanie Sanders and June Reinisch (1999) are considered to be the first to study what people mean, when they say they "had sex." Based on data from American university students in 1991, they found that there was an almost unanimous consensus (99.5%) that penis-in-vagina intercourse is definitely sex, while opinions diverged when it came to anal sex and oral sex

(80% and 40%, respectively). Of course, this was prior to the sex scandal at the American White House, which, some argue, recalibrated how sexual behaviors were defined and understood. In 1998, then US President Clinton claimed to have not had "sexual relations" with his intern Monica Lewinsky, who performed oral sex on him (CNN, 1998). The fact that he did not reciprocate seemed to be an important aspect in justifying his definition of "not sex." The ambiguity of sexual semantics became a popular topic with that scandal. But more interesting than how clearly and unanimously people define sex are the studies analyzing how people's definitions of sex are related to their sexual behaviors and self-perception. Zoe Peterson and Charlene Muehelenhard (2007) asked students about their experiences of "almost sex" and "not quite sex." While they too found that penetrative, penis-in-vagina sex was more likely to be labelled as definitely sex, and oral more likely to be labelled "not quite sex," it also turned out that people were quite sensitive to the presumed consequences of applying a label to a behavior. The researchers offered evocative examples of what they called people's motivated definitions – people deeming ambiguous sexual experiences as sex or not sex based on their desire to avoid psychological distress, harm to relationships, or simply to manage the impressions other people make of them.

One of their research participants, who identified as a heterosexual woman, and did not want to change that identification, said that her experience of another woman using her fingers to stimulate her and performing oral sex on her was "not quite sex," because a penis was not involved. Another woman from a religious background, classified brief penetration without climax as "not quite sex," to avoid feelings of guilt and to maintain her view of herself as a virgin. But losing one's virginity was also the reason for some young men to define their ambiguous sexual experiences as most

definitely sex, an example was given of only engaging in anal sex to be able to say that virginity is maintained. These examples show that what people experience and describe as sex is highly situational. It depends on behaviors, partners, motivations, self-perceptions, normative beliefs, and the context of labeling – are we asked to count our sexual partners by a new partner or a doctor; are we asked to count them as a young man or a young woman?

However, we need at least a rough agreement regarding what we mean, when we say "sex" in this book. For the discussion at hand, practices motivated by sexual pleasure are sex. These encompass the mental, emotional, and bodily activities, motivated by a quest for sexual pleasure. Searching for information *en route* to pleasure is included, and we take a contextual approach to pleasure – it may peak in an orgasm, but might as well crest at the satisfaction gained from pleasuring others. This is a necessarily partial definition. There are sexual activities that are not primarily motivated by pleasure, and we are excluding them from this discussion. Making a baby, should it not go very smoothly, can be sparse on pleasure. There are sexual activities motivated by monetary returns, which might not always be pleasurable either. Finally, intercourse or sexual activities happening as part of sexual assault are often not even motivated by the pleasure of the assaulter, but rather by violence, hate, and power. In fact, an argument can be made towards not qualifying those acts as sex but just as violence. Yet, all of these kinds of penetrative acts may in some way involve social media. People trying to get pregnant use specific apps that have social networking functions; there are infertility, pregnancy, and mothering communities; there are support groups and forums for assault survivors. Sex workers use mainstream and niche social media apps and platforms to find and vet potential clients. There is social media–based sex work, which consists of posting images, videos, and doing live

camming sessions. However, to keep the discussion at hand manageable, we have chosen to focus on sex as the kinds of practices where sexual pleasure is the primary motivator.

But this book is not just about sex. This is a book about sex and social media. So how do we define social media? Again, this is a term widely used in everyday conversations, and nine urban people out of ten in the world would probably have some kind of an opinion on what social media is.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

Social media is often defined as internet-based digital technologies that support users connecting with each other, creating various multimodal (text, image, video) content, and interacting with both each other and the content in various ways (commenting, sharing, remixing, friending, following, collaborating, building groups, etc). The internet-based digital technologies, in turn, are usually specified as platforms and mobile apps.[2] This is a trend of the last decade. Before that it was less common to access social media from one's mobile device, and the spaces people visited from their computers were more likely to be called (social networking) sites, forums, or blogs. Tarleton Gillespie (2017), an American media scholar, says that platforms do not create or commission content, but they do make very important choices about how the content, which we, the users, create, link to, and share is organized, distributed, and made more or less visible. As some social media platforms have become obscenely large and powerful (Facebook has 2.4 billion monthly active users), previously arbitrary-seeming corporate

2 Although it is important to remember here that not all platforms and all mobile apps are about social media. Amazon is a platform as well, just like puzzle videogame Candy Crush and fitness tracker Runkeeper are mobile apps.

decisions about how a service functions have become questions about norms, values, public opinion, and manipulation thereof. Criticism abounds from scholars and the public regarding the concentration of power into the hands of a few corporations who seem to have very little regard for privacy, data security, quality of public discourse, democracy, and anything that doesn't line their pockets.[3] And while conversations about billions of users and the impact of social media on broader discourse can make this communication technology seem ubiquitous, not everyone has access. Digital divides have long been considered indicators of deeper inequalities around socioeconomic status, education, and age. The younger, more educated, and more urban a person is, the more likely they are to access and use social media.

Social media platforms usually have a mobile app version – a smaller software program designed specifically to run on mobile devices (smartphones and tablets). Natively mobile social media apps also exist, meaning they do not have a web-based platform that allows all of the same functionality (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok). Globally, people are increasingly using social media via their smartphones, and the app industry as a whole is growing very fast, which has logically led to app stores becoming a hugely powerful force governing our social and private lives.[4,5] In our conversation

3 Facebook owns Facebook, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp; Google owns Search, Google Ads, Google Maps, Gmail, Android, and YouTube; the Chinese behemoth Tencent owns QQ and WeChat, Cyworld, but is also the world's largest gaming company; the Russian Mail.Ru owns social media platforms VKontakte and OK.ru, email, instant messaging, and gaming.

4 According to the reports created by We Are Social, there were 3.725 billion social media users in the world in 2019 and 3.66 billion people used social media on mobile devices.

5 Its revenue is expected to be $189 billion by 2020.