

Intimacy Re-defined: Online Sexual Performances and the Urge of Posing

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Various studies on Internet self-portraits reveal how practices and discourses associated with digital images challenge the modern view of sexuality and the body as the ultimate private domain. Notions of intimacy seem to have moved from the “passion for privacy” of the nineteenth century to the “empowering exhibitionism” of the Internet (Koskela 207). Intimacy here refers to sexual and emotional aspects of private life that are often kept away from the public gaze, yet increasingly shared through various media technologies such as webcams. Thus intimacy is not just something that exists beyond social structures but it is shaped and constructed by technological, social, economic, and political orders (Saarenmaa 141-143, Cohen 1-3, Zelizer 10-12). This article examines the ways in which intimacy is performed, shaped and regulated in the realm of social networking sites and how the sexual performances shared by young adults may challenge the traditional notions of privacy.

Sharing intimate stories and self-portraits with global audiences is becoming increasingly popular among young adults around the world.¹ Posting sexual-

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¹ While DIY porn is generally seen as a novel phenomenon connected with online participatory cultures, it is actually an old genre used in print media. Finnish men’s magazines used to publish a section called “Your own Pictures,” which gained popularity in the 1990s. According to the female editor-in-chief of one of the leading men’s magazines, *Kalle*, the magazine struggled to publish all the pictures that people submitted. The section was popular as a type of amateur porn, allowing for readers’ own interpretations of pornographic poses and creating a space for imagining oneself as a porn star by exploring sexuality and the public performance of sexuality. Similarly, courses have been of-

ly suggestive images of oneself, once considered eccentric, has become an ordinary practice on various social networking sites. These images challenge the idea of the power of watching and may, in particular contexts, re-define the conventional normative ideas of sexuality. Situated within the multiple networks of global media culture, these sites also stretch the boundaries of national media scape in ways that have various, often contradictory, implications to the representations of race and ethnicity.

While these performances open up space for alternative expressions of sexuality, some of them re-circulate and reiterate notions of gender in the form of trendy retrosexism. According to Imelda Whelehan retrosexism is an ironic disguise or an alibi of sexism applied in popular culture (15). It appears as a stylized sexual imagery, often considered as edgy and radical, that re-circulate nostalgic imagery of gender inequality in an ironic sexy package. As Feona Attwood argues, it is important to critically discuss sexual imageries not simply through claims of democratization of desire but to closely analyze the variety of representations at play (*Sexed Up* 83). Among the multitude of representations we are likely to find both retrosexist and transgressive imageries that work in different ways to materialize sexuality.

This essay explores public performances of sexuality by examining a popular Finnish social networking site, IRC-Galleria (IRC-G). Following the paths from one profile to another reveals a network of multilayered sexual performances with a mixture of traditional, parodic, raunchy, subcultural, gay, and ethnic representations. The sexual performances illustrate the blurring boundaries between the public and the private in the multiple, individualized, and complex structure of social networks.

Social media, individualization, and intimacy

Communication technologies provide new ways for audiences to participate in and create content online. With the aid of technology, audiences are able to form groups and communities with others who share similar interests, build social relations, and share images and information across distances. New participatory practices of online media in particular have raised discussions on the ways in which traditional forms of public engagements have become more individualistic and how the lines between public and private are blurred.

The understanding of individualization here builds on the sociological theory of individualization that identifies a society where individuals are more responsible for their own lives, and where their new social connections are based

ferred for women to explore their sexuality by posing nude in pornographic settings (Nikunen, *Pornokuva* 53-54).

on selectivity rather than pre-existing organizations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2-3). This is connected with the idea of the reflexive self, which refers to the continuous work on identity, self-realization, and discourses of freedom, choice, and individuality (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 26-27). Indeed, the web designs of various social networking sites support and encourage repetitious identity performance through profile images, likes and lists of interests, hobbies, and memberships in sub-groups. In this way, social networking sites offer possibilities for continuous self-representation and selective use of information, with the result that the virtual space becomes subdivided into smaller and smaller circles that reflect various tastes of groups and subcultures. There is an embedded complex multiplicity in the structure of social networks that seems to enhance simultaneous existence of various sensibilities based on individual selectivity. Such selectivity is illustrated in what Manuel Castells has termed “self- mass communication,” referring to the creative autonomy offered by social networking sites that empower individuals (4-8).

While social networking sites point to the individualization of the public sphere in forms of communication, they also introduce new and more intimate contents of self-expression. New forms of self-expression include more suggestive and openly sexual images and confessional narratives posted by individuals to the public. A study by Lasen and Gomez-Cruz on online self-portraits points out how the use and distribution of digital images online challenge the modern view of sexuality and the body as the ultimate private domain (206). They recognize the emergence of a shared intimacy that changes the relations between privacy and intimacy. Intimacy seems to move toward “empowering exhibitionism” online (Koskela 207). The notion of empowering exhibitionism refers to the sense of power connected to the act of sharing intimacy with potentially global audiences. These performances then push against traditional understanding of the power of watching and the boundaries of the public and the private. Empowering in this sense points out the liberating aspect of sharing intimacy and connects with the democratization of desire, where the multiplicity of personal and sexual narratives question the primacy of one form of sexuality over others. This connects with Michael Warner’s discussion of the growing visibility of sexualities that may challenge the notion of normal or ideal sex as private, monogamous, and heterosexual (177).

However, the emergence of intimate self-representations can be seen as part of a larger shift of sexualization or pornification (Attwood *Sexed Up* 86-87; Paasonen et al. 2-13) shaped by transformations in global media industries. This refers to various transformations on different levels of culture and society that point in the same direction, albeit distinct in contents and structures, and therefore are identified or discussed as a particular cultural phenomenon. These transformations include a growing preoccupation with sexual identities and

practices, proliferation of sexual images and texts in public, emergence of sexual conflicts and scandals, and growth of commercial sex services and products.

The proliferation of sexual imageries and the invention of new forms of sexual expression are shaped by new individualized media technology that allows for virtual sexual encounters through online chat rooms, email, and mobile phones. These shifts also suggest a move away from the expert authority distributed by traditional media outlets toward virtual participant voices of different and diverse taste cultures (Attwood *Sexed Up* 80). For example, the proliferation of alternative, independent, queer, artistic, and amateur pornographies on the Internet has given subcultural productions unprecedented visibility. The online experience offers new ways to realize self-made pornography and sexual imagery, which can be interpreted as a resistance or a challenge toward the standardized images of mainstream pornography (Paasonen 161).

However, the pornification of culture also refers to the mainstreaming of sexual performances and pornography itself, and to the blurring boundary between popular media culture and porn aesthetics, in which pornographic posing has become everyday aesthetics. Thus, intimate self-portraits online are not autonomous forms of self-expression but are configured by cultural forms of representations.

While technology provides options for multiple representations of sexuality, the performances are largely defined by existing porn cultures and the available repertoire of sexual aesthetic. The aesthetics of mainstream porn identifiable in standardized, trimmed bodies and female poses of moist lips, half-closed eyes, push-up breasts and arched back, become to signify what is generally understood as sexually arousing (Paasonen et al. 12). Despite options for alternatives, there may be more imitations and simulations of the already familiar repertoires of sexuality. Moreover, such performances are always contextual and are defined by technological formats that create the space, shape, and form of media use (Boyd & Heer par. 4).

Clearly not all young people are eager to share intimate details online. However, they may have to encounter and negotiate, in a different way than generations before, with the growing amount of sexually explicit material and expectations of sexiness or attractiveness while participating in social networking sites popular among their peers. Due to the selective and interactive nature of online media, however, it is also possible to disregard or publicly resist online cultures that stand against one's values and instead join and create groups that are in accord with one's views. Most importantly, the users of social networks apply various practices to define and battle over the norms of sexuality relevant to them. In what follows, I will take a closer look at the popular social networking site IRC-G and its imagery.

Social networking site: IRC-G

Facebook and Instagram are the most popular social networking sites; however, there are various, what I call *residual* (Williams 122) social networks that have been even more popular on the national level, such as Hyves in the Netherlands, Nasza-klasa.pl in Poland, and Vkontakte in Russia. Hi5 in Portugal and StudiVZ/VZ-Netzwerke in Germany are almost as popular as Facebook in their respective countries. Still, Facebook and Instagram have gradually gained popularity and replaced the national social networking sites that were established before Facebook in Europe, such as the Bebo in Britain. One of these national sites is the Finnish IRC-G, a social networking site founded in 2000 with the age limit of 12. At its peak, IRC-G attracted over 900,000 users, Finnish adolescents and young adults, weekly. While IRC-G is a Finnish network, it shares central characteristics of other social networks popular among young adults. These features include making profiles, posting images, chatting, connecting with friends, and forming groups. Thus, research on IRC-G conveys some of the prevalent features of online communication, while also showing characteristics that are related to particular national and local cultures.

The ways in which people engage in social networking sites are not only shaped by the social environment or online culture of the particular site but also significantly by the template design. The design defines the range and mode of actions as well as the overall tone of the site. Thus, the design invites different kinds of sensibilities, which are furthered by the netiquette, rules, and regulations. Posting images and creating profiles are two of the prominent features in the most popular social networking sites (Piskorski). In terms of images, most of the popular social networking sites used by adolescents or young adults include clear rules that prevent the posting of sexually explicit, offensive, or violent images. This does not mean that such images do not exist; the common practice by Facebook and other networks is that offensive images are removed once they are reported to the moderators by the users. Due to the characteristics of social networks that are based on friendship groups, many of the images, if acceptable to the group and conforming to its cultural values, do not reach the moderators.

Tervetuloa IRC-Galleriaan!

IRC-Galleria on Suomen suurin nuorten aikuisten nettiyhteisö, jossa on yli 450 000 rekisteröitynyttä käyttäjää. IRC-Galleriaan lisätään kuukausittain n. 180 000 kuvaa, 200 000 blogimerkintää ja seitsemän miljoona kommenttia. Käyttäjien keski-ikä on reilut 22 vuotta.

IRC-Galleriassa voit

Pitää yhteyttä ystäviisi ja löytää uusia kavereita. Kirjoittaa blogia, lisätä kuvia ja videoita muiden nähtäväksi, ja jutella sinua kiinnostavista aiheista lukuisissa yhteisöissä. Voit perustaa myös omia yhteisöjäsi esimerkiksi kaveri- tai harrastusporukaksi käyttöösi.

Etkö vielä ole jäsen?

Liity ilmaiseksi

Uudet kuvat

11-6-2013 10:32 ninimau-	11-6-2013 10:28 hellou_	11-4-2013 10:27 irem
11-6-2013 10:26 -Antti	11-6-2013 10:26 Tiituti	11-6-2013 10:25 Jenzh

Uudet käyttäjät

11-6-2013 10:28 	11-6-2013 09:07 	11-6-2013 09:13
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fig. 1: The front page of the IRC-Galleria.

IRC-Galleria has 450,000 registered users, of whom 220,583 are women, and 227,891 are men. The average age of the members is 23. There are some limitations to IRC-G-statistics that are important to notice. Since many of the members left the community several years ago, they are not active users; however, their profiles still remain on the site. Thus, among the 450,000 profiles available, many are inactive, but we have no accurate information regarding the amount of these inactive profiles. Their inclusion in the overall statistics distorts, for example, the data on the average age of users as the inactive profiles get older. Active users are most likely younger than the statistics tell us. However, IRC-G still remains popular among the young with over six million images shared and over 75,000 images being posted to IRC-G daily.

The biggest communities in IRC-G are various groups formed around music and entertainment. The group with the most members (31,046) is a community established for fans of listening to music loudly. One of the fastest growing groups, titled "Pissing People Off is an Art Form," conveys the sensibility of IRC-G as a forum for the humor, parody, and brash attitudes characteristic of teenage life. Although group titles and comments speak of the sensibilities of

rebelliousness, misbehavior, and wit, numerous groups are formed simply on the basis of a location, a school, or a hobby.

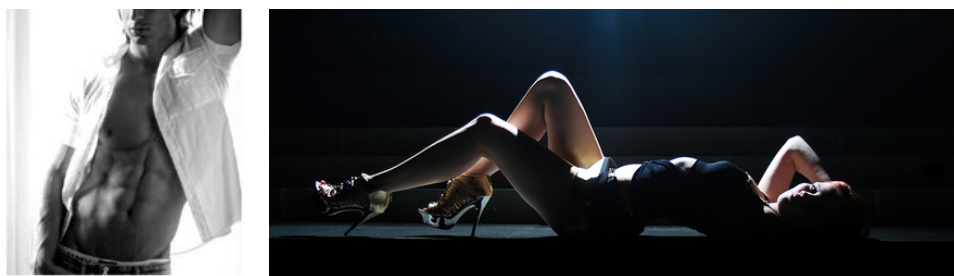
As with most social networking sites, posting images is one of the most popular actions. To explore the images and the scale of intimacy shared on IRC-Galleria, I first analyzed 800 images that were posted on the same day, March 5, 2012. I categorized the images into 11 groups according to the pose, picture size, and gender. This selection of 800 images uploaded on one day is telling of the typical overall imagery on IRC-Galleria; however, it does not inform us on the typical profile image. Therefore, I collected another random sample of 100 images, this time concentrating on the profiles, and categorized them in the same way as the previous 800 images. The images and profiles are public to anyone signed in to the network. However, members can define the level of privacy concerning the scale of information shared with others in the form of comments and chats, so the degree of privacy of the collected profiles varied. Among the first 800 images collected, the most typical image was a close-up (shoulders and arms showing) female pose. There were 286 images of this type, and 102 images of female facial close-ups. Thus, female images were clearly prevalent; in fact, over half (443) were images of girls or women posing alone. The corresponding figure for men and boys posing alone was 108. Female groups appeared in 36 images, in comparison to 13 images of male groups. In images where a boy and a girl posed together (23), 9 included a kiss or a hug. The sample did not include images of two girls or two boys kissing; however, the material included two openly lesbian profiles.²

Suggestive images: Fashionable flirt with soft-porn

IRC-Galleria has clear rules that ban the posting of sexually explicit or offensive images. The regulations set clear frames for images, but they do not rule out suggestive sexual posing. In this study, a suggestive pose was defined as a pose that shows cleavage or a thigh in a seductive manner, a pose that includes gestures of undressing, or a pose with suggestive facial expressions, such as parted lips showing tongue, eyes half-closed, or imitations of a kiss. From the 800 images sampled, only 10% were sexually suggestive. Also, from the 100 randomly selected profile images (45 male, 53 female), 10% were suggestive (2 male, 8 fe-

² It is not possible to definitively state whether the identities online reflect the “real” identities offline. However, identities are performed and constructed online, and as such they make claims about gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. It is obvious, however, that some profiles in the “Gay and Proud” group, for example, were created simply as jokes and as a form of trolling. This can be deduced from the choice of groups (exaggeration of identity through several listings of the same “100 percent gay” groups on the profile), number of friends (none), and records of chats (none) on the profile.

male). The typical suggestive image showed a female member posing in the frame from the waist up, wearing a top that reveals cleavage. Usually, her gaze was toward the camera, her lips invitingly parted, and her back arched to emphasize both buttocks and breasts. The position imitates the soft-porn pin-up poses familiar from evening papers, magazines, and calendars. However, the imagery also suggests the intertwining aesthetics of the fashion world and soft-porn. Further analysis of the profiles reveals that nearly half of the suggestive images uploaded by members, both female and male, were connected to modeling and introduced their professional modeling work: pictures conveyed traces of professional work with carefully set up lightning and artificial studio settings. These studio shoots included images with lifted hems showing thighs, see-through tops, and cleavage. The few male modeling images included fashion shoots done in a professional style, but there were also images of bare upper bodies that showed well-built muscles in dramatic lightning. These images were both artistic and sporty, drawing attention to the member's good looks and well-built body. They present masculinity in the traditional active frame, where the muscular male body is a sign of management, power, and control (Siibak 408).



figs. 2 & 3: Fashion shots in IRC-Galleria.

The intertwined references of soft-porn and modeling, particularly in female images, are not accidental. They demonstrate the blurring boundaries of porn aesthetics and high fashion, as porn stars take part in high couture fashion shows and international fashion houses from Gucci to Versace introduce fashion photos with porno-chic aesthetics and exposure. Illustrative of the intertwined entrained cultures of fashion and porn is the clothing line named Porn Star (Benson, par. 21). In the context of social networking sites, the mixture of fashion and porn translates into mimicry of soft-porn poses as a practice ground for modeling work. The suggestive images of social network site (SNS) profiles convey skillful, beautiful photos of young women and men, yet at the same time, they point to the eagerness of the young to adapt to the requirements and trends of the business in their hopes of gaining a promising modeling career.

Sexual representations here are defined by the modeling business and its assumed expectations of what is sexy: a conventional repertoire of soft-porn pin-up poses with facial expressions of desire and bodies twisted to show both pleasure and flesh. There are evident dimensions of empowerment in sharing images that connect one's identity with the world of fashion, and this empowerment reaches beyond the boundaries of the mundane teenage circles of school and the local hangouts. The context of fashion is one to be admired rather than to be ashamed of and therefore offers a respectable, coveted, and structured frame for the intimacy displayed. The increasing nudity in the fashion world and the acceptance of porn-style posing, however, raises questions of other blurring lines: how is the generic amalgam of porn and fashion reflected in the practice of modeling, in the creation of portfolios, and in auditions?

Trickling trashy sexiness

While the model shots form one clear category of suggestive images, the majority of the profile images on IRC-G are ordinary close-up portraits. On the surface then, there seems to be few images that are sexually suggestive. However, following the paths from one profile to another, and from profiles to groups, reveals subcultures of sexualities as well as various practices of parodying, circulating, and re-shaping sexuality. From the profiles selected, one leads to a group called "Association of Trickle (Heruttajayhdistys)." The title refers to the practice of posing sexually to get, trickle, or ooze positive comments from others. The group has 62 members (68% female, 32% male) with the age average of 22. It is a mixture of people with clearly different views regarding what the "association" stands for. In one of the subcultural sexual performances, a red-haired member named Lady Carniwhore, wearing fishnet-stockings, black leather boots, and a black corset, poses on a pole as if ready to begin her dance. Lady Carniwhore's images are carefully styled and staged to convey the connection with the sadomasochist (S/M) sexual subculture. In the group of Trickle, her images make an exception as representations of an alternative sexual culture that is being introduced to a wider audience.

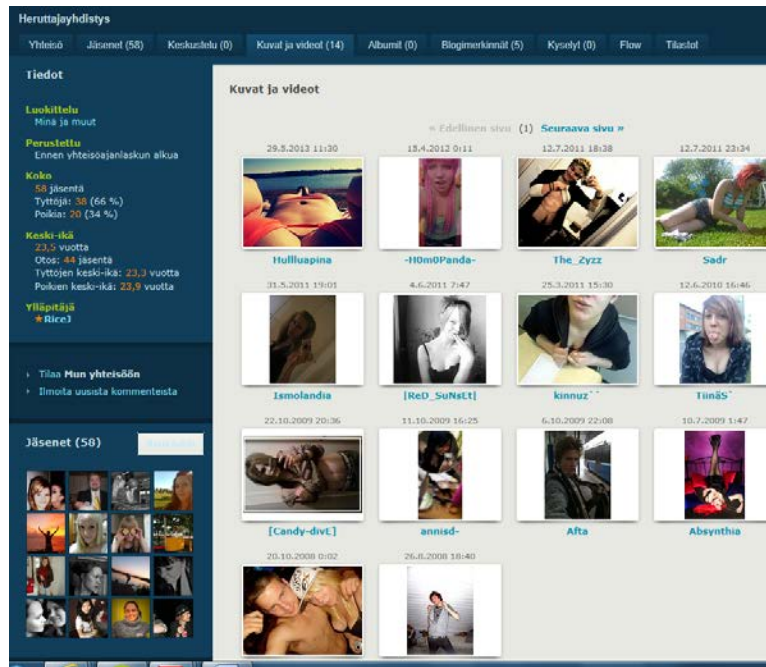


fig. 4: Images from the Association of Tricklers.

Images by other members appear to be more random, yet are likewise open with their sexual performances. JessicaTIETTY (hereinafter “Jessica”) poses in what seems to be a tourist beach party picture showing cleavage with a young man with a bare upper body. In her case, it is not so much the images but the captions that set the tone of raunchy sexuality. The party image is captioned “FUCK” (or more precisely CUNT) and another image that shows her bending toward the camera in a revealing top is captioned “willy-head.” The captions add raunchy meanings to images that are otherwise slightly suggestive but not explicitly sexual. To the left side of the image on her profile, she lists “wanking” as her hobby. In addition to the “Association of Tricklers,” she belongs to a group titled “Orgasms also for Women” (85 members, of which 62 are identified as male).

Jessica’s profile conveys the raunchy and strong, even aggressive, sexual performances of the site that are most evidently played out. The performances appear not so much in the visual but in the textual elements of the SNS profiles: in the group titles, in the lists of hobbies, and in the opinions and life philosophies of the members. The sexual performances of Jessica also clearly draw on the youth culture of strong language and misbehavior. Jessica performs female sexuality that is active and forward, yet it is not exactly the *Cosmopolitan* type of female sexual agency in *Sex in the City* manner (Attwood *Sluts* 245). Rather, it

points toward the reckless behavior that has become familiar in the misbehavior of celebrities such as Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, and Paris Hilton. The scandalous behavior of young female celebrities, including flashing their vulvas, flirting and kissing other famous women, and performing drunk on the stage of a topless bar, appears to be a loss of control and a sad sidetrack of their careers. However, at the same time, these performances can be seen as provocative acts that challenge the norms of white female sexuality in the form of apparent pin-up sexiness connected with virtuous good-girl-ness. The SNS profiles of Jessica and the likes clearly draw on the sensibility of the sassy, in-your-face sexuality. It may offer a sense of empowerment in terms of publicly claiming sexual agency and the right for satisfaction while not conforming to the expectations of romantic good-girl-ness. The performance of a straightforward sexual appetite by young women carries particular “white trash sensibility” and connects with class connotations of being low and dirty (Penley 311-314, Attwood *Sluts* 239). This is illustrative in the re-appropriation of such profile names as hoes, whores, and sluts (cf. Attwood *Sluts* 239-241). To use such profile names can be seen as a tactic to purposefully announce bad behavior and reject expected good manners. It can be interpreted as a discursive coup, a carnivalesque turnover, aimed at re-defining the meaning of the word. Instead of being ashamed of their overt sexuality, the “sluts” and “hoes” proudly announce their sexuality and use the degenerative vocabulary against their critics. Using contradiction as a tool, they demonstrate “the power of being trashy” (Kipnis and Reeder 119).

However, as carnivalesque representations tend to do, these performances carry and reiterate the conventional interpretation of the sexually active woman as a slut. This image is reiterated and circulated in the performances and perhaps even emphasized with the wild party girl imagery that accompanies it. It seems that portraying active female sexuality outside this range of dichotomic imagery, the good or the bad, is challenging. Moreover, while part of the raunchy sexual images can be interpreted as carnivalesque images of trashy sexiness or as parodic references to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, the remainder illustrate the emergence of the pornographic, lubricious style as an actual currency that young women consider relevant in maintaining or achieving status in their social networks and in their relationships with the opposite sex.

As the examples above show, the definitions of sexualities are played out in various realms of culture from the celebrity world to the culture of music videos, and they are reenacted in the performances, styles, and parodic re-interpretations of the social network profiles. Sexual performances appear increasingly as a question of taste and aesthetics rather than a question of morality and ethics. This emphasis on style and taste opens markets for female consumers to realize their active sexuality, be it chic or raunchy, with the selection of sex products from porn videos to sex toys. IRC-G includes various groups that promote such attitudes: “Hey, girls watch porn too,” “Morning sex is the best,”

“Come to my place – I am horny,” “Sex is nothing without me,” and “Size matters.” Young women, by flagging these groups in their profiles, show that they are sexually active and enjoy sex.

In a similar way, although in a different context, Carla Stokes (2007) has examined how young black girls are performing their identities in relation to hip hop culture and its sexual scripts. Stokes discusses how young black women introduce themselves on their homepages as “freaks” who are sexually adventurous, ready to please and explore. Stokes argues that, in these performances, young black women of a particular musical subculture make their own interpretations and self-expressions of female sexuality; however, at the same time their performances are strongly influenced by the male-dominated hip hop culture and the emergence of the strip club culture with insatiable female bodies. The contemporary sexing-up culture involves re-commodification of bodies and the introduction of women as sexual subjects who know their desires (Attwood *Sexed Up* 85-86). This novel subjectivity, however, may carry mechanisms of objectification in a new suit, and as our examples show, it can be realized in different cultural, ethnic, and racial contexts in different ways.

Parodic re-play

While some of the profiles in the Trickleers group enhance the sentiment of suggestive sexuality and titillation, part of the images make fun of the suggestive pose itself. There is a particular genre of parodic images, by both men and women, that imitate the cleavage shot in various ways. These include images where men and women push their breasts to create the necessary cleavage, which is afterwards smudged over by a pen to obscure the cleavage. These images illustrate the ironic stance toward both the practice of trickling itself and the online image regulation. By imitating the pose, members make fun of the assumed signs and criteria of sexual hotness. By smudging the cleavage, they mock the regulations that set the guidelines of what is acceptable and what is not, and laugh at the moral concerns regarding youth’s online practices.



fig. 5: Parody of a cleavage pose by a male member.

Nancy Baym argues that humor is a significant element of online communication. It serves as “a locus of group solidarity and emergent individuality” (Baym par.5) Youtube videos, Facebook postings, fan forums, and chat rooms are abundant with parodic commentaries, funny re-makes, and ironic reflexive references to various cultural texts. One might argue that social networks enhance and support a particular kind of playful, ironic, and parodic sensibility connected with the competent media-savvy generation of online users who cultivate witty remarks, intertextual references, and manipulated image reconstructions. Humor on the social networks varies from sophisticated criticism to simple wordplay or acts of audacity. On the IRC-G, humor is cultivated in the contorted group titles and profile names that reframe, distort, comment on, and amplify the original text, slogan, or ideology. Such use of humor creates multiplicity of meanings that enhance “ambiguity and interpretative diversity” (Baym par.7).

The sensibility of irony offers sophisticated distance to serious, straightforward, and simple readings of media. Illustrative of this is the group named “Tits matter – character is a bonus.” The group has over 400 members, half of them male and half female. Some of the male members may be in the group to state their sexist, objectifying views on women and to declare their identities as non-feminist. Other male members may have joined the group as an ironic joke to parody the old-fashioned objectification. Again, many of the women may be part of the group to state that they indeed have the bodily figure required, and that they embrace this cultural norm of feminine sexuality. They may have joined the group simply in response to peer pressure and to show a sense of humor, or to share the ironic and trendy retro-sexist attitudes of their peers. Finally, they may be in the group to irritate their other friends and to resist the “proper” politically correct response to the title clause. Some members, identified as lesbian, are also part of the group. As openly lesbian members, they voice dissonance in the assumed male heterosexual group and offer yet another interpretation on norms of female sexuality and perhaps parody the retro-sexism itself. Thus, a group that may seem sexist and heterosexual from the surface includes multiple layers of different interpretations of the group title and, consequently, on the boundaries and norms of sexuality.

Navigating the social networking sites requires a capacity to recognize the parodic dimensions of texts and images. It requires shared knowledge and shared codes that provide a common ground for interpretations and set the parameters for appropriateness. Images of drunkenness or suggestive sexuality may well fit the appropriateness of a particular forum, but would be interpreted differently outside it.

The multi-layered forums of IRC-G have not only one but several notions and contradictory sensibilities of what a particular group represents. The Association of Tricklees includes sexual performances from the carefully staged S/M

style to raunchy sexuality, from a celebration of the female orgasm to parodies of soft-porn cleavage posing. Thus, there is constant incongruity within the groups that pull interpretations in different directions. Such media surroundings seem to support constant questioning of the authenticity of texts, images, and actions – and lead to an emphasis on playfulness over truthfulness. Inevitably, such audience practices question the simplistic view of audiences as being susceptible to simple and straightforward (harmful and risky) media effects. However, this does not mean that the young people are necessarily always capable of making sense of the complex array of media messages or the various sensibilities that are simultaneously available, nor does it mean that they would not be vulnerable to peer pressure on their media interpretations.

Gay pride and forced intimacy

Many of the sex-oriented groups on IRC-G are heterosexually oriented; however, there seems to be vibrant gay activity on the IRC-G as well. While the boundaries of sexuality are guarded in various ways through legislation and social norms offline, it seems that the online world offers a complex mixture of straight and gay sexualities where different sexual desires cross and mix. The mixture of sexual orientations is both intentional and unintentional, illustrating the random and intricate nature of participatory culture.

On groups such as “Gay and Proud,” the members perform their identities by aligning their images, interests, hobbies, life-philosophies, and love-life expectations, in a way that is similar to any other group. The Gay and Proud group consists of 73 members, most of which (82%) are male and claim a gay identity. The group operates as a forum for introducing oneself to others who share the gay identity; however, profile images are not particularly revealing or openly sexual. They follow the lines of most other profile images, with plain facial or waist-up shots in everyday contexts. Many of the comments beneath the profile images remark on the looks of the one pictured, and there are clear attempts to make further contacts. Comments include requests for phone numbers and inquiries of hometowns or areas of residence. Thus, the site is used to make contacts but also simply to chat with others in the group.

Although IRC-G seems to offer an interesting mixture of social network space shared by straight and gay young adults, this mixture is not always a happy one. Openly gay profiles also include a few hostile and homophobic comments that are not often encountered on the other profiles. These comments voice disgust particularly toward sexual intercourse between men, name homosexuals as abnormal, and associate anal sex with excrement. While the members themselves have not proposed intimate details of their sex-lives on their profiles, others use the space to sexualize them. In this way, through the forced sexualization of profiles, the boundaries of their intimacy are stretched beyond or

against members' own definitions. The lesbian profiles (as explored on the forums "All Lesbian" and "Proud to be Lesbian") do not include as much hostile commenting as the gay male ones. This suggests that male homosexuality is particularly marginalized and considered to be a social threat by some members of the network.

To be openly gay, then, is not necessarily easy even in the sexualized and individualized publicity of virtual social networks. To perform sexuality is not a free-floating act of self-realization but a constant battle over meanings, definitions, and norms circulated in the virtual world. However, within the individualized publicity of networks, some collective actions take place that organize sexual performance to political ends. Gay groups such as "I Accept Hetero Marriages," "Gay and Proud," and "Proud as Hell to be Lesbian" point to the political struggle of sexual equality and draw from the vocabulary of the civil rights movement and political debates on gay rights, such as the right to marry. Typically, the group-naming follows the overall humorous tone and strong language present on IRC-G.

Michael Warner argues for publicity of sexualities as a way to challenge the normative view of one sexuality as better than the other (7). For Warner, the growing visibility of sexualities, whether pornographic or some other kind, offers knowledge on the practices, styles, and typologies of various sexual cultures. Such a visibility, also offered in IRC-Galleria by the presence of openly gay and lesbian profiles, can be seen as offering means to resist the notion of "good sex" as monogamous, heterosexual, and private, a notion produced through regulation and sexual stigmas (Warner, 25-26). It also offers space for more collective political struggle.

At the same time, however, as we have seen, the counter-voices, the homophobic and hostile views, are also made public. The anti-gay comments under openly gay profiles display the struggle over definitional power and the emotions that are activated as the marginal becomes visible. To follow Sara Ahmed, the politics of fear and hate are circulated by the affect that is associated with particular bodies (54). The politics of hate, in this case, use the discourse of intimacy and forced intimatization to crop sexual identities.

Affect of the racialized sexuality

The structure of social networking sites, through various group memberships, allows for creating multiple layers of social groups that reflect different sides of identity, age, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity in different ways. A member of the gay group "Gay and Proud" is also member of various Latino groups, such as "Corazon Latino." While the Gay and Proud group introduces his sexual orientation, the Corazon Latino group accentuates his identity as Latino. Members of Corazon Latino state that they have origins mostly in Latin America or

Spain. Some of the members perform a more accentuated Finnish identity, which is illustrated in their profile with connection to particular schools and locations in Finland, while others emphasize their identity as Latinos, with origins in Mexico, for example. The chats and comments in this group are a multilingual mixture of Spanish, Finnish, and English, and sometimes all three languages are used within one conversation. Such a group formation illustrates how social media templates and technologies allow hybridity that emerges in the mixture of cultures and draws from a series of identifications operating simultaneously (Hall 595–633; Ibrahim, 238–240). The multiplicity and overlapping of performed identities speak of the transitional and interstitial passages that mark the in-between space of the ‘third’, not to be reduced to either-or identity positions.

Indicative is the ways in which members of the Corazon Latino group engage various Latino-oriented relationship groups to celebrate and display their cultural origins. Some of the groups draw on the discourses of machismo culture to highlight Latinos as hot lovers or Latinas as insatiable and sexy. However, again, it is not a question of simple repetition, but a repetition with a twist. This is illustrated in the group titles such as “Latinos take your women” and “Latinas take your men”, which seize the stereotypical claims of hot Latinos to conquer Finns with their sexual power. The group proudly re-seizes the claim and performs sexuality accordingly to both build identity and to provoke others. Here it is important to notice how, again, the groups’ titles comment on the current political debates in Finland. In recent years, anti-immigrant discourses have gained visibility and political foothold in Finland and elsewhere in Europe. Although much of the debate concentrates on the neoliberal perspective of economic costs of immigration, the fear and threat of the foreign body is pivotal in the anti-immigrant discourse. While the former discourse claim that foreigners hurt Finns economically by taking their jobs, the latter follows the logic by stating that they take the women as well. The fear of the foreign, and in particular black male, body has historical roots in the European colonial discourse of other cultures as exotic yet inferior, and it draws on the racialized discourse of sexuality and over-sexualization of the Other (Hall, 266–268). The dual-act of fetish and danger operates to pose immigrant bodies as both desirable and a threat to the normalized sexual order: ethnically homogenous heterosexual relationships.

The affective value of these body imageries is connected with the association of the bodies with past (repressive) histories, narratives and contexts and becomes accumulated in circulation (Ahmed 45–47). What becomes relevant is how particular associations (predatory sexuality) stick to particular bodies (the black or Latin male body). The stickiness draws from racist narratives distributed in historical educational and popular literature, and it becomes activated in the contemporary public debates and in the news stories related to immigration, marriages, love stories, and news of sexual violence (Keskinen, 210–220). Such fears are connected with the idealized notions of Finnish culture as homogene-

ous, coherent, and white. Against this whiteness appears the threatening presence of foreign, sexually attractive people, who cross the boundaries of nation-states and the bodily boundaries of the white and the black. Thus, publicly displayed sexual desires between and across races and ethnicities do not only destabilize the normative sexual order but also shake the boundaries of the nation.

The Latino groups cleverly appropriate the discourse of sexualized Others and take it for their own use with pride (*Latinos Take Your Women*). Boasting sexual superiority and skills as lovers, they ironically re-circulate the discourse in a way that both deconstructs and strengthens it. To follow Laura Kipnis, the imagery of social networking sites stages cultural ideologies of sexuality, desire, and taboo in a way that both upholds and transgresses the norms and categories it proposes (164). There is a powerful fascination, in desire and disgust, to racial difference in various sexual performances, which is played out explicitly in sexual representations. (see Miller-Young 38-43). This fascination is set forth in multiple different ways on social networking sites. It is re-interpreted and parodied, but also strengthened in the comments that express disgust of interracial relationships.

In a group with members identified as Finnish Somalian, a profile image of “Muhis” shows a black man in his 30s with two white women. He is standing in the middle with a drink in one hand, and the women, dressed in revealing party dresses, are on both his sides, smiling cheerfully in his arms. The first comment beneath the image suggestively asks, “Oh, what have the girls found?” This is followed by comments declaring that the white defend the white, and that all blacks should return to slavery and be shot. The comments end with the words, “White power.” Clearly, then, crossing boundaries—racial and national—requires a degree of boldness in the Finnish context, where an image referring to interracial relationships—and the joy in it—spurs reactions of harassment, threat, and fear. However, “White Power” comments we also posted by a member with a black profile presumably as an act of trolling illustrating the multi-layered and contradictory sensibilities of the IRC-G environment.

Among the multi-culturally-oriented, explicitly non-racist groups, there are several groups that declare nationalism, white power, and racism. One of these is “Love your race”, which has 73 members. All except one are white and promote whiteness in their affiliations with neo-nazism and the white power movement. Profile names include “Honestly Racist,” “Skinhead,” and “Soldier of Freedom.” The only non-white profile belongs to what appears to be a black young man in the image, who claims membership to such groups as “Born to be White,” “Thank God I’m White,” “Skinheads of Finland,” and “SS-Finland.” This obviously confuses the other members. Angry comments beneath his profile image tell him to go back to Africa, call him “nigger,” and state disbelief on his brashness to claim these groups. The profile may be a fake one created as a form of cyberbullying. However, it may also be another counter-act to ridicule, con-

fuse, and tarnish the white supremacy movement. By appropriating the white supremacy groups, the black member spoils the sense of shared community and the coherence of the political movement.

On the surface, then, IRC-G appears to be a shallow site filled with teenage humor; however, underneath root political struggles of various forms related to sexuality, nationality, gender, race, and ethnicity. Forming groups is one of the collective forms of action, while commenting on others' profiles and staging personal profiles in particular ways speak of the individualized politics of online media.

Conclusions

The desire to discuss sex and the urge to express sexuality and intimacy online is evident. IRC-G is abundant with images and texts that display, comment on, and circulate sexuality in various ways. The regulations and rules of the sites demarcate what can be shown, particularly in terms of images. Thus, what cannot be expressed through images is expressed in words, texts, and titles. Further, what cannot be expressed within one social network spills over to another, perhaps more lenient site, such as the amateur and do-it-yourself pornography sites.

Clearly, social networking sites offer novel ways to display intimacy. Network profiles provide options for self-descriptions (images and texts) and the construction of paths through group memberships and friend lists, which connect the individual profile to various, often contradictory taste-groups, subcultures, and collectivities. The female sexual imagery includes flirtatious performances with a mixture of fashion and soft-porn, highly stylized S/M dominas and brashy, sluttish, sexual performances.

As argued in the beginning of this essay, such visibility of personal pleasures and likings uses empowering exhibitionism to challenge the idea that passion is for privacy. To display one's personal likings in public can be a highly political act, and to be in public, to perform to potentially global audiences, can be empowering, particularly to those who are on the margins of society. Sexual minorities as well as racial and ethnic minorities display identities according to their own definitions or against discourses forced on them. The taboo of gay sexuality and interracial sexual imagery are played out with provocative recirculation of the ineffable.

The visibility of minorities, their personal profiles, pleasures, and affiliations support Michael Warner's view of public sexual performances as enabling "unpredicted forms of experience," surprises and discoveries that work to broaden one's understanding of sexuality and desire beyond preconceived labels (185). Making queer sexualities public in the way done on IRC-G, present the possibility of reorganizing the boundaries of respectability and normalcy. At the

same time, however, forced intimacy is used to categorize, to shame, and to crop identities and, therefore, also the agency that such a display might provide. Comments that convey disgust toward sexual, racial, and ethnic minorities speak of the ways in which intimacy is politicized and remains an object of constant struggle. In this struggle over meanings, various notions of sexuality and the cultural values and norms of sexuality come into play.

It is a politics with a twist that travels with playful aesthetics and taste cultures rather than with clear guidelines of morality and ethics. Politics of sexuality is constructed by ironic and parodic commenting, re-circulation, twists and flips that constantly escape definitions. Yet the parodic representations draw often on conservative, sexist, and racist notions of sexuality. Through incessant circulation they remain relevant and gain affective value.

The case of IRC-Galleria shows that online participatory cultures offer multiplicity of layers; however, the mixture of interpretations makes it increasingly difficult to pin down the sensibilities within. With the practices of ironic commenting, re-interpretations, and intentional misrepresentations of identity, the groups become inexorably multilayered and complex clusters of meanings that disperse and arrive at different social and cultural repertoires. Thus, any group on IRC-G seems to carry more than one sensibility and cannot be reduced to simple, straightforward interpretations.

This resistance to fixed and clear boundaries seems to be characteristic of the online environment (Siapera 7). As this may be problematic for political movements, in the context of ethnicity and gender, it may offer new kind of openness and diversity relevant for expressing and experiencing hybridity. The space of social media might be well described to express “the nervous temporality of the transitional” and “the structure of ambivalence” (Bhabha 216, 217). Within this oscillating structure, however, constant struggles over demarcation and exclusion take place and therefore it is far from free space of limitless self-expression. But here, perhaps lies the power of social media: it offers a public space to stage the struggle over meanings and makes the acts defining and defying notions of sexuality visible – whether we agree with them or not.

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