



SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT

Two- and three-year projects and postdoctoral projects

Registration number, Östersjöstiftelsen: 2019-0010

Project manager: Jenny Sundén

Project title: *Rethinking sexuality: A geopolitics of digital sexual cultures in Estonia, Sweden and Finland*

1. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

The past decade has witnessed both vibrant sexual and minoritarian digital cultures and the aggressive weeding out of nudity and sexual expression from most social media platforms. Spaces for networked sexual self-expression and communication have flourished, then contracted, so that sexuality has largely become zoned out from the sociality allowed by social media community standards. (see Paasonen and Sundén 2024). The position of sexuality within the ecosystems of social media remains in flux as terrain for social, political, cultural, and infrastructural negotiation and contestation. Against the backdrop of this deplatformization of sex, our project breaks novel ground (in, at least, three ways) by highlighting the need for:

Re-platforming sex in times of its deplatformization

We discuss how the processes of “deplatforming of sex” do not accomplish a safer space, but rather a categorical dismissal of the fact that human sociality is inclusive of sexuality. It further entails a rejection of expressions of curiosity, desire, libidinous longing, need for information, support and community, not least among those already marginalized (e.g., among queer, gender-nonconforming, and kink communities). Curbing this kind of self-expression, sociality, and knowledge is detrimental to sexual rights on and beyond the internet, a development to which our case studies provide something of an antidote. We demonstrate how sexual social media that challenge the logic of respectability are vital in creating possibilities for worldmaking, belonging, and existing on sexual margins. On our three platforms, sexual expression, learning, fantasy, and desire become forces binding users to these sites and fuelling diverse engagements between them. In this sense, they explicitly *re-platform* sex within a broader sex-negative social media ecology. (Paasonen et al. 2023, Sundén et al. 2022, Tiidenberg et al. 2023).

Rethinking “the social” in social media studies as something which includes the sexual

Social media platforms have redefined not only how people are social online, but what it means to be social in the first place. At a moment when social relatedness is increasingly reduced to computational connectivity in corporate infrastructures, we argue for including sexual sites in definitions and analyses of social media and, by extension, for including sex in definitions of “the social” itself. Our work elevates new concepts like “context promiscuity” to be used alongside more canonical ones, such as “context collapse,” in order to think through the particularities and implications of sexual sociality. The sexual platforms we have studied offer forms of sociability revolving around the centrality of sexual desire in social formations. We attend to how sociability is crafted, maintained, and disrupted on sexual social media platforms as spaces from where alternative proposals of the social might be built. (Paasonen et al. 2023).

Decoupling sex and nudity from default notions of harm in how online spaces are built, governed, policed, and experienced

On all three platforms we discuss, nudity and sex are detached from notions of risk and harm (to which they are bound by default on most social media platforms), which, we argue, offers an intriguing model for platform governance. There is a burgeoning body of scholarship within the area of platform governance, yet much of it centers on rights and a preoccupation with notions of “freedom of speech.” Yet, moderation of intimacy and sexuality are often ground zero of platform governance. The governance principles of our platforms differ from generic social media in a number of ways: First, the notion of safety is uncoupled from sexual content and the imperatives of moderating it, becoming reframed through the notions of consent, authenticity, harassment, shaming, and violence instead.



Secondly, this invites nuanced forms of moderation, such as user moderation through verification and other forms of user and community governance. (Tiidenberg 2021).

2. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

Situated at the intersection of digital media studies and gender and sexuality studies, our project contributes to international debates on digital sexual cultures, platform governance, sexuality research ethics, and digital intimacy. However, by refocusing these in a Nordic and Baltic perspective, it also challenges the Anglocentrism that cuts through much state-of-the-art inquiry on these topics. Rather than settling for a critique of how sexuality is governed and ousted in and by social media community standards and app store policies set by US-based, globally operating data giants like Alphabet and Meta, we turn to local web-based sexual platforms of the semi-vintage kind in order to learn from their social codes, moderation practices, and user tactics to articulate alternative understandings of the value of sexual sociality. Our discussion of user perceptions of safety and risk, proximity and distance, visibility and invisibility, privacy and publicness contribute to nuanced understandings of digital intimacies, how they are made, and how they matter. In exploring why and how sexual platforms matter, and for whom, we make a productive intervention in debates on social media content regulation, one mindful of the granularities of lived experience and the ambiguities and complexities that sexual, networked lives entail.

3. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

Studying regional platforms that may seem marginal, we suggest, has the potential to open new avenues towards understanding sexual cultures, digital sexual geographies, as well as networked sociality more broadly. By building on what we see as our three “edge cases” that all move *in sexual margins or borderlands* (of Estonian swingers, Swedish kinksters, and Finnish pervs...) our main contribution to Baltic and East European Studies consists of how such border practices challenge binary divisions of oppression and liberation, “East” and “West,” and make space for alternate, less divisive understandings.

Departing from how sexual liberation is often understood in a framework of progressive, Western modernity and particular forms of public visibility and pride, we discuss how a lack of such visibility and publicness is then imagined as the opposite of liberation, as oppression, secrecy, and closeted shame. Together with a number of sexuality studies scholars in post-soviet contexts, we argue that a focus on visibility as a universal measure of progressive sexual politics conceals the significance of sexual expressions that are marginal, ephemeral, and not quite public, or public in other more subtle ways.

Our platforms function as semi-public closets of sorts, not of shame – but of safety – providing an interesting counterpoint to the idea of visible sexual liberation. For those who cannot afford being fully visible and as such identifiable, who cannot risk being outed, the closet is not only a space of oppression, but a space of safety and – we would like to add – a different kind of sexual progressiveness. In a time when large social media platforms keep careful track of their users' identities and movements, to refrain from visibility can be a radical act. In looking at this tactical space in-between visibility and invisibility, we build on and develop the discussion of ‘opacity’ in queer and postcolonial theorizing as an alternative to and a critique of public visibility as the self-evident grounds for sexual progressiveness. (Sundén 2023a, 2023b).

Our study does not consist of a comparison between our respective contexts, but rather one which understands sexuality as an intriguing basis for rethinking the relations between the national and the transnational and their connections to libidinal intensities, sexual politics and world-making. Our national contexts and histories of sexuality are deeply connected with one other, through relations and movements across borders – be they geographic, legislative, moral or desirous – in ways that figure and refigure national contexts and their interconnections (Sundén, Paasonen and Tiidenberg forthcoming special issue of *Lambda Nordica*, 2024).



We have found that these platforms shape how users imagine and engage with location and locatedness by negotiating notions of proximity and distance, risk and safety. An example of this is how users imagine the country they live in. In the case of Estonia, it was simultaneously described as too small and not small enough. This dialectical imaginary of distance collapses kilometers, users' level of experience in the (swinger) lifestyle, the intensity of their desires, the density of population where they live, as well as issues of privacy, norms, deviance, and vulnerability. We found that distance can be an obstacle in geopolitics of hooking up, but it can equally be a shield of protection against the vulnerabilities and risks linked to unwanted openness and outness. Similarly, proximity, including cultural proximity can offer a sense of safety, but equally a suffocating sense of too small or too close. (Sundén et al. 2022).

The three platforms' local and regional orientation relate quite concretely to a sense of cultural intelligibility, in so far as they provide spaces where the participants feel they belong and make sense. For example, among the Swedish participants, a select few are out and proud BDSM activists and educators, but for most such public outness is not an option due to lingering stigma. The participants speak of how their sexual practices would be unintelligible in their wider circles of friends and followers on mainstream social media platforms, making clear how – even in a supposedly sexually liberated nation like Sweden – there are distinct limits for what constitutes intelligible desires and lives. (Sundén et al. 2022). In histories of sexuality and feminism in Sweden, kink and BDSM have quite consistently been relegated to a domain of sexual illegitimacy (or bad sex). At the same time, waves of queer sexual politics and a cultural mainstreaming of kink simultaneously point in other directions. Uses of the kink platform Darkside here challenge the idea of normalizing sexual otherness by public exposure, and instead open up for new modes of obscure sexual expression. (Sundén 2023b).

We also show how the linguistic, cultural, and regional specificity of these platforms breeds a sense of trust and intimacy of the kind more difficult to accomplish in internationally operating social media services. For example, Alastonsuomi is explicitly rooted in the local not only through its main language of operation (Finnish) but through its name ('Naked Finland') gesturing towards a nation-state (Finland) by building on national imaginaries and reshaping them in its explicit displays of naked bodies. Both the visual landscape and uses of Alastonsuomi are tightly connected to the physical locations that they simultaneously transcend. People pose in city parks, in forests, at summer cottages, and by the lakeside, transforming mundane spaces into sites of exhibitionism and kink play. It joins users into something of a nation exposed, or a nation where belonging is defined in terms of naked displays and exchanges, making room for unclothed self-expression in a region where showing skin in public is complicated due to the climate alone. (Sundén et al. 2022).

4. New research questions that the project has led to

There is profound significance to sexual social media as spaces where people have a sense of freedom over their sexual self-expression; where they make sense and have a right to exist. Yet they inescapably do this within specific constraints, designs, and platform vernaculars. On the platforms we have studied, the intense sociality of sex becomes an energy interlinking bodies, making and shaping sociability, and making people want to connect. At the same time, what makes some users come together may rub other users the wrong way. While providing vital spaces of sexual self-expression, platform connectivity may also be highly frictionous as expectations, wishes, and desires clash and collide. We thus increasingly came to address and discuss such tensions and *frictions* involved in platformed sexual sociality.

Our participants discuss their attachments to these platforms as fundamentally ambiguous in the sense that they enjoy something they also dislikes. Indeed, many of our interviews are rife with accounts of friction, irritation, and frustration from relying on platforms for sexual expression and relating while also wishing that things would be different. They constantly draw boundaries between whom they want to connect with and who is better ignored, guarding their own boundaries while also getting cut off against their will through ghosting, blocking, or by not receiving the desired feedback. Within the heteronormative logic which, to a large extent, regulates our platforms (even while moving beyond "vanilla"), many female users discussed their constant deliberation over which male users to respond to, and how, as the volume of messages could be overwhelming. In addressing all this, we develop a theoretical framework to understand social media friction and how users form anticipatory,



apprehensive, and irritable attachments to digital platforms (Sundén et al. forthcoming). Since no matter how conflicted these users might feel, they keep coming back, for lack of better options.

5. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

The results have primarily been disseminated in relevant leading peer review journals, including a guest edited special issue with *Lambda Nordica* (a peer-reviewed open-access academic journal of LGBTQ studies in the Nordic region) following our closing conference “Rethinking digital sexuality in Nordic and Post-Soviet contexts: A symposium” in the fall 2022. We are currently finalizing a monograph to be published (open access) with MIT Press. We have also organized conference panels and presented papers at a number of key international conferences. In addition, we have delivered a number of invited talks based on the project for both academic and wider audiences.

Monographs

Sundén, Jenny, Susanna Paasonen and Katrin Tiidenberg (forthcoming) *Hot connections: Why sexual platforms matter*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Peer-reviewed journal articles

Tiidenberg, Katrin, Susanna Paasonen, Jenny Sundén and Maria Vihlman. 2023. “Vanilla normies and fellow pervs: Boundary work on sexual platforms.” *Sexualities*. Open access: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231215763>.

Paasonen, Susanna, Jenny Sundén, Katrin Tiidenberg and Maria Vihlman. 2023. “About sex, open-mindedness and cinnamon buns: Exploring sexual social media.” *Social Media + Society* 9, no.1. Open access: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221147324>.

Sundén, Jenny. 2023a. “Digital kink obscurity: A sexual politics beyond visibility and comprehension.” *Sexualities*. Open access: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607221124401>.

Sundén, Jenny. 2023b. “Tracing sexual otherness in Sweden: The opacity of online kink.” *Lambda Nordica* 28, no. 1: 76–100. Open access: <https://www.lambdanordica.org/index.php/lambdanordica/article/view/868/687>.

Sundén, Jenny, Susanna Paasonen, Katrin Tiidenberg and Maria Vihlman. 2022. “Locating sex: Regional geographies of sexual social media.” *Gender, Place & Culture*. For the special issue “Remapping desire: Bringing back sex within geographies of sexualities”. Guest editors: Cesare Di Felicianantonio and Valerie De Craene. Open access: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2022.2122410>.

Tiidenberg, Katrin (2021) “Sex, power and platform governance”. *Porn Studies*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23268743.2021.1974312>. Open access version: <https://katrin-tiidenberg.com/papers/2021-sex-power-and-platform-governance-1>.



Book chapters

Paasonen, Susanna. Forthcoming. “‘In a sea of dicks’: On the limits of porn.” In *Handbook of Adult Film and Media*, edited by Peter Alilunas, Patrick Keilty & Darshana Mini. Exeter: Intellect.

Vihlman, Maria and Susanna Paasonen. Forthcoming. “Alastomassa Suomessa: Seksuaalisuus ja sosiaalinen media.” In *Tiedon paikantuminen. Menetelmät ja reflektio feministisessä tutkimuksessa*, edited by Marjo Kolehmainen, Leena-Maija Rossi & Jaana Vuori. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Paasonen, Susanna and Jenny Sundén. 2024. “Objectionable nipples: Puritan data politics and sexual agency in social media.” In *Queer Data Studies*, edited by Patrick Keilty. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Edited collections

Sundén, Jenny, Susanna Paasonen and Katrin Tiidenberg. eds. Forthcoming 2024. Special issue of *Lambda Nordica*: “Sex at the borders: Queering transnational histories.”

Table of contents

1. “Sex at the borders: A special issue introduction” Jenny Sundén, Susanna Paasonen and Katrin Tiidenberg
2. “Sisters across the Gulf: Transnational Connections and Frictions in an Estonian-Finnish Lesbian Network of the early 1990s” Rebeka Pöldsam and Riikka Taavetti
3. “Transnational Connections: The mutually constructed homosexuality between Finland and Sweden” Tuula Juvonen
4. “Pornography and transnationality: The case of Hälle, Sweden in the 1970s” Mariah Larsson
5. “Monsieur Mosse: A Bad Gay? Queer Celebrity in Finnish Print Media, 1960s to 1980s” Susanna Paasonen and Mari Pajala

Conference organization

Sundén, Jenny, Susanna Paasonen and Katrin Tiidenberg, with Kirill Polkov. Conference organizers. 2022. “Rethinking sexuality across Nordic and Post-Soviet contexts: A symposium,” September 29-30, Södertörn University.

Organized conference panels and paper presentations

Paasonen, Susanna, Jenny Sundén & Katrin Tiidenberg. 2023. “Rethinking the social in social media.” Paper presentation at *AoIR2023: Revolutions*, October 18-21, Philadelphia.

Sundén, Jenny. 2022. “Digital kink opacity: Sexual social media beyond visibility and comprehension.” Paper presentation at *AoIR2022: Decolonising the Internet*, November 2-5, Dublin.

Sundén, Jenny. 2021. “The pull of the recent past: Tracing sexual deviance in Swedish online kink.” Paper presentation at *Histories of Sexualities, Gender Diversity and Queer in the Nordic and Baltic Region*, October 25-26, University of Helsinki/online conference.

Sundén, Jenny, Katrin Tiidenberg, Susanna Paasonen & Maria Vihlman. 2021. “Space, place and location in sexual social media.” Panel presentation at *AoIR2021: Independence*. October 13-16, online conference.



Tiidenberg, Katrin, Jenny Sundén & Susanna Paasonen. 2021. "Governing the margins? How European sexual social media platforms govern and assign meaning to content." Paper presentation at *First Annual Conference of the Platform Governance Research Network*, March 24-26, online conference.

Sundén, Jenny, Katrin Tiidenberg, Susanna Paasonen & Maria Vihlman. 2021. "Local spaces of play: Geographies of sexual social media." Panel presentation at *Geomedia 2021: Off the grid*. May 5-8, University of Siegen/online conference.

Sundén, Jenny, Susanna Paasonen & Katrin Tiidenberg. 2020. "Platformed sex lives." Panel presentation at *AoIR2020: Life (online)*. October 27-31, online conference.

Invited talks

Paasonen, Susanna. 2024. "Questionable Tastes? How Sexual Sociality Matters." Keynote presentation at *Assemblage III: Community & Care*. Northumbria University, February 13-16.

Sundén, Jenny. 2023. "Tactical kink obscurity: Resisting public visibility on sexual social media platforms." Keynote presentation at *Platforms and uses: Film, television, video games and digital creation*. Organized by the Université de Montréal and the Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris 3, November 1-3, Montréal.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2023. "The perpetual problem with platformed sex." Keynote presentation at *Sex Pan!cs Conference*. Dublin City University, October 12-14.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2023. "'In a sea of dicks': On the limits of porn." Keynote presentation at *Sex in Contemporary Media: An Interdisciplinary Conference*. University of Warwick/online, October 4-6.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2023. "Seksi, verkkomedia ja pornon häilyvyys." Invited presentation at *SEKS2023* education day. SEXPO/Helsinki City Theatre, March 31.

Sundén, Jenny. 2023. "Low theory, kink opacity and a 'closet-positive' analysis: Sexual politics and pleasures beyond visibility and comprehension." Invited speaker to the international symposium *Thinking Wildly with Jack Halberstam*, Uppsala University, March 16-17.

Tiidenberg, Katrin. 2023. "Pleasure, Pain, and Politics: let's talk about sex on social media." Public lecture at Oslo University Library, November 11.

Tiidenberg, Katrin. 2023. Panel discussion on "Sex Positivity" at Viljandi Psychiatric Hospital's conference "Avameelselt (seksuaal)elust" (Open discussion about sex lives) Viljandi, Estonia, September 6.

Tiidenberg, Katrin. 2023. "Sex and Platform Governance." Invited talk for WZB Berlin Social Science Center, March 30.

Sundén, Jenny. 2023. "Latex, spanking and cinnamon buns: Exploring sexual social media." Invited talk at the Department of Media Technology, Södertörn University, with participants from The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (RFSL), May 17.

Tiidenberg, Katrin. 2022. "Sex and social media: platforms, panics and pleasures." Keynote presentation for "Digital Intimacies and Emerging Adults in Southern Europe: Crisis, Pandemics and Resistances project." University of Padova, September 2-3.