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# **YOUTH AND MEDIATED INTIMACY: An audience study into the Participations and Representations on the Social Networking Site Netlog**

**Sander De Ridder**

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## ABSTRACT

Young people today live complex intimacies that they share through telling and performing. This intimate storytelling is an important part of the continuous shaping of gendered, sexual and relational identities. In contemporary youth culture, these intimate stories are increasingly told, shared, produced and reproduced in digital and interactive media such as social networking sites. This working paper aims to reveal how storytelling is becoming a popular media practice and how intimate stories are socially and culturally organised on

social networking sites. Departing from the idea that youngsters today are still subjected to heteronormative constraints, a participant observation of 200 Flemish youth on the popular social networking site Netlog showed how they produce intimacies online. A quantitative content analysis and qualitative textual analysis with a queer theory sensibility exposed how intimate stories on social networking sites are performative, commodified and public.



## PREFACE

This working paper is part of the research project 'The online stage: Youth and heteronormativity, self-representation and identity construction in online communication (2010-2014)' financed by the Special Research Fund (BOF), Ghent University. The main objective of the project is to develop a better understanding of the new opportunities for self-representation in popular social media to perform gender and sexual identities. Drawing on queer theory, the project focuses on the possible creative self-expressions that go beyond the heteronormative. The project is democratically inspired and therefore aims to expose dynamics of exclusion in social media but also recognises the power of youthful creativity to resist, alter and erode structural inequalities.

Second, this project also formed the basis for the PhD project entitled 'Intimate storytelling as popular media practice: An empirical inquiry into the productions, consumptions and structures of young people's intimate stories in digital and interactive media'. Departing from the everyday life of youth, it is argued that documenting and analysing intimate stories is important to understand sexual, gendered and relational identities. Showing how intimate storytelling today has become an increasingly popular media practice, the PhD is concerned with how to live an intimate citizenship within digital and interactive media cultures. This working paper summarises the findings of how youngsters produce intimate stories on a social networking site.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 technologies have brought considerable challenges for cultural media scholars. These digital cultures disrupted the clear relationships between the professional producers and consumers. Complex mediated spaces, such as social networking sites (SNSs), allow interaction through numerous conversations where publics are organised in structured networks. Understanding how sense-making processes and identity formations take place in these digital environments is now a primary concern for contemporary cultural media studies. The purpose of this working paper is to contribute to these ongoing explorations by focusing on mediated storytelling or, more specifically, on young people's self-representational stories, which Lundby (2008: 5) defines as 'personal stories, told with the storyteller's own voice'. Particularly focusing on *intimate storytelling*, the social and cultural organisation of intimate self-storytelling will be exposed, recognising the formation of cultural identities as key to understanding self-representational practices (Nyboe and Drotner, 2008). Intimate stories are specifically telling about the sexual, the gendered and the relational. To investigate intimate digital storytelling, this working paper focuses on a particular study of the popular SNS Netlog ([www.netlog.com](http://www.netlog.com)), using a social constructionist perspective on gender and sexuality (Seidman, 2010), with a clear queer theoretical sensibility (Butler, 1990; Chambers, 2007). An SNS can be understood as '(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (Boyd, 2011: 39).

At the beginning of this research, Netlog was the most popular online space frequented by Flemish youth. A long-term observation of those young people's participations, revealed how several of these online activities on Netlog are significant for understanding contemporary gender practices, sexual identities and, more generally, the intimate life worlds and cultures of youth. Conversations about relationships, sexuality and surveying and interpellating the gender practices of others are just a few examples of the meaningful participation and representation that occurred during the 18 months of participant observation this working paper will introduce.

Considerable work has already been conducted on how youngsters use digital media for different purposes in everyday life, including in the Flemish and Belgian context. Recent contributions can be found in the book *EYouth*, edited by Walrave and Heirman (2012), and *Kids Online*, edited by d'Haenens and Vandoninck (2012). Both contributions focus on how youth are empowered by digital media on the one hand but increasingly confronted with risks on the other. Although these contributions offer valuable information on situations of today and reflect on direct policy implications for tomorrow, the aim of the current paper is to reveal the *zeitgeist* concerning youth, intimacy and digital media. Thereby, it reflects on the more long-term social and cultural developments to which these mediated environments will lead. However, it will therefore be impossible to provide direct and clear answers. Rather, the work presented here will expose the complexity of the different processes involved from



a cultural media studies perspective. The opportunities/threats binary in which intimate digital cultures are often understood is not always sufficient to capture long-term cultural processes and transformations.

The theoretical part of this working paper will focus on how intimate practices, gender and sexuality are increasingly linked to transformation and democratisation. Although recognising this change, this idea of ‘progress’ will be nuanced by explaining how young people are still primarily forced to identify with heteronormative identities and institutions. To understand these negotiations in popular interactive media such as SNSs, the complexity of a mediation process will be introduced. Storytelling, and more specifically ‘intimate storytelling’ (see Plummer, 1995), is primarily an everyday life practice that has become increasingly intertwined with media. Particularly, the emergence of digital and participatory media increasingly connects the intimate lives of people with media practices. Understanding storytelling as a mediation process primarily means recognising that people are not only telling stories as individuals but also as a collective of audiences and are therefore using the opportunities media companies that create SNSs—such as Netlog—provide them.

To answer the question of how intimate stories are socially and culturally organised on SNSs, I maintained my own profile on Netlog. This ‘research profile’ connected me with youngsters between 13 and 18 years old. Eventually, a sample of 200 profiles was collected and saved offline. This data was analysed using a quantitative content analysis followed by a more in-depth qualitative textual analysis (Van Zoonen, 1994). The textual analysis located the intimate stories within the social process of identity formation and was then combined with a more critical queer analysis.



## YOUTH AND MEDIATED INTIMACIES

### The Social and Cultural Organisation of Intimate Stories in Youth Cultures

Intimacy may be an empty signifier to use for an analysis if not clearly defined. Although intimacy can be about friendships and family life (Berlant, 2000), I will focus on intimacy as involving the more sexual aspects of social life. Intimacy is therefore connected with sexual and gender identities as well as the politics of sexuality. Particular institutions and social and discursive organisational principles regulate intimacy. Today's intimacies, such as romantic relationships and sexual identities, are primarily associated with 'transformation' and 'increased democratisation' (Giddens, 1992). New gender relations are said to emerge in the current late modernity, creating more equal and open sexual relationships that are reflexively constructed through self-created biographies. Not only have things changed on the personal and social levels, but the institutional organisation of intimacy has transformed as well. For example, some Western countries have opened marriage to non-heterosexual couples. Despite these notable social and institutional transformations in the intimate lives of people, researchers of sexuality and youth culture (Johansson, 2007; Nayak and Kehily, 2008) are struggling with celebrating this progress:

*Today, young people find themselves in a field of tension between stricter sexual morals and sexual liberation, between gender repression and sexual equality, between giving shape to new types of sexual patterns and falling into traditional social forms.*

(Johansson, 2007: 102)

The late modernist argument on a more 'free' and 'reflexive' intimacy seems to inadequately address the struggles between repression and equality, new patterns and traditional forms, as argued by Johansson. Discourses and regimes regulate sexual practices, identities and institutions in often-unconscious ways (Heaphy, 2007; Foucault, 1978; Foucault, 1995). To understand this complexity in contemporary culture, Rahman and Jackson (2010) describe how gender and sexual identities are shaped within a 'reflexive essentialism'. They argue that although progress has been made and individuals today have an increased agency to negotiate and live gender and sexual identities, they are still subjected to the fundamental idea that 'humans were born with a sexual nature and that the natural order created a series of sexual types' (Seidman, 2010: 38). Sexual types are not equal, but the 'heterosexual type' is seen as more 'authentic'. Further, sexuality is strongly intertwined with a coherent gender in order to be socially and culturally *intelligible* (Butler, 1990). This heterosexual *subject position*, which Butler defines as the 'heterosexual matrix', creates a series of pre-defined scripts to which late modern subjects have access. Therefore, this late modern progress is not to be misunderstood as the outcome of a pre-discursive agency. Intimate practices in youth cultures are therefore strongly subjected to living within a framework that excludes certain intimate practices.



These social, cultural and institutional structures could be seen as pre-defined scripts people live by, which are shown in the heterosexual matrix. This matrix explains how the biological given sex, gender, desire and sexual practices need to cohere in order to be socially and culturally intelligible. Today's youth cultures can be understood as agents that are reflexively acting within this matrix, scarcely being open and liberal for some dislocations to this demanded coherence. However, the knowledge produced through this matrix will rebuke dislocations that go too far and cause international confusion, 'damaging' its core. This set of norms over how intimate practices are organised is described by Warner (1991) as *heteronormativity*. Damaging the core of the heterosexual matrix through acts in everyday life can be potentially dangerous for teenagers, as they can lose status or social capital or even put themselves at risk of being violated.

Because of these potential dangers when resisting heteronormativity, social and cultural change in intimate practices only occurs slowly. Questioning the matrix and thereby renegotiating heteronormativity could be understood as a resistant or subversive project that exposes the repetitive practices through which the matrix is maintained. A girl, acting manly, shows how femininity is a 'performance'; a boy, acting feminine, shows the same. It is exactly through these 'eroding' processes that heteronormativity can be culturally resisted (Chambers, 2007; Butler, 1990). When these resistant renegotiations again produce knowledge, discourses are questioned, opened and broadened, ultimately creating social change.

Intimate identities are not only performed through bodily acts; talking about intimacy is also an important aspect of everyday life. *Intimate stories* are those narratives that focus on the sexual, the gendered and the relational (Plummer, 1995). Intimate stories are socially constructed and subjected to discursive understandings of gender, sexuality and relationships (cf. *supra*). Intimate storytelling must therefore be approached as the very *process* through which these social constructions and subjectivities give shape to identities in everyday life. In the following section, it is argued that intimate storytelling is becoming increasingly connected to media. Since the emergence of the *digital culture*, intimate storytelling has become a popular mediated practice.

## **Mediated Intimacy**

The aim of the current section is to offer an understanding of how youthful subjectivities are living in increasingly mediated worlds, thereby considering the everyday life practices of teenagers as intertwined with media. Using the concept of mediation, it is explained how media further transform—for better or for worse—intimacy in late modernity. However, this is not to argue that media have a direct effect on how intimacies are lived today. Rather, it is to acknowledge how processes of mediation are becoming more and more important (certainly in relation to very popular web 2.0 applications such as SNSs).

<sup>1</sup> Mediation is to be distinguished from the notion of mediatization (see Krotz, 2011).

Mediation<sup>1</sup> is a useful concept to understand the role of the media in modern societies. The concept of mediation is mostly associated with Silverstone, who defines it as follows:

*Mediation, in the sense in which I am using the term, describes the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the World Wide Web) are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life.*

(Silverstone, 2002: 762)

Here, Silverstone emphasises the dual role of media: On the one hand, media are *institutions* transmitting through *technology*; on the other, they are institutions generating *representations*, holding *symbolic power*. Media have been telling sexual and intimate stories for some decades now (see Plummer, 2003; Plummer, 1995), resulting in heated debates in academia and society on how intimacies are represented, underrepresented, stereotyped and symbolically annihilated. Particular popular television texts have recently been studied in relation to heteronormativity, demanding more open, postmodern stories that resist hierarchical binaries and fixed identity representations (Avila-Saavedra, 2009).

Audiences have been given a significant role in cultural media studies in actively negotiating with these media texts (Fiske, 2010; Hall, 2003). Media texts are seen as inherently polysemic, meaning audiences can decode texts in ways unintended by the producers. However, today, the mass communication model of producer/text/audience is thoroughly disrupted (Livingstone, 2009). With the emergence of digital media, the media institutions, technologies and activities of audiences changed. In the profoundly mediated worlds—nothing can be taught outside of mediation (Livingstone, 2009)—the audience ‘has become synonymous with being an individual or social subject’ (Sandvoss, 2011). Today, intimate stories told in everyday life have become intertwined with media in youth culture (2010). Couldry (2008: 374) defines this digital storytelling as ‘the whole range of personal stories now being told in potentially *public* form using digital media resources’ [my emphasis]. This public storytelling makes digital media spaces *political spaces* that hold the potential to further transform the social and cultural organisation of intimate practices in everyday life.

In contemporary mediated worlds, representation and symbolic power are still profoundly present. Digital cultures accumulate the production of meaning by not only producing, but also continuously reproducing, images, text and intertext. However, the audience seems lost but certainly not dead. Whereas Fiske and Hall saw the audience actively interpreting, it is now also actively producing. Therefore, the ‘former’ active audience needs to be redefined as participating in and through media (Schäfer, 2011; Carpentier, 2011b). Despite this digital evolution—revolution should be avoided here (van Dijk, 2006)—this does not equal a power shift in everyday mediated worlds. Particularly in popular web 2.0 environments, users do *not* automatically have more control over the media institutions, technologies and representations (cf. infra).



In understanding youth and mediated intimacy, I argued that in today's late modern societies, intimate storytelling is intertwined with media. Media users today are often equated with social identities or being an individual rather than an audience. To understand intimacy in youth cultures, the narrations that youngsters produce in popular and digital media environments such as SNSs are meaningful. However, despite the discourse on participation, this mostly emphasises 'power shifts', and thus, the complexity of technology and symbolic power must not be neglected. The next section presents SNS cultures as constitutive of the social world and, more specifically, as meaningful environments for intimate storytelling. Thus, the digital space of an SNS is not only individually or socially relevant but also profoundly political.



## THE STORY OF THE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE

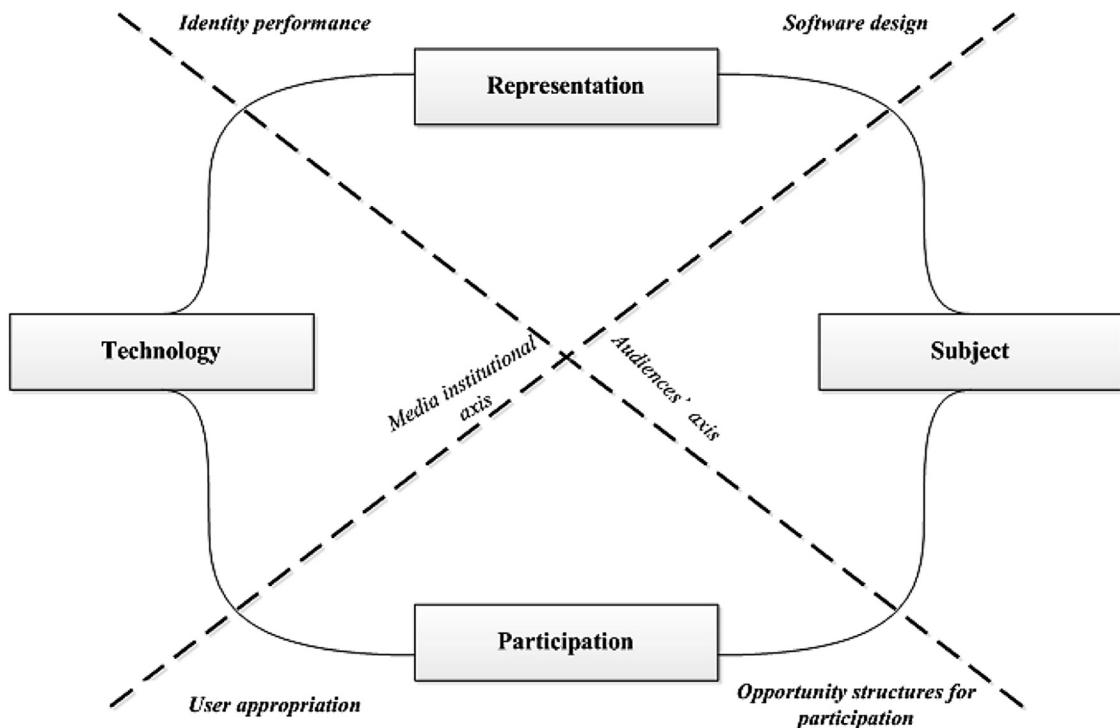


FIGURE 1: *Mediated storytelling on social networking sites: An articulation model*

In investigating how SNSs are meaningful technologies for intimate storytelling in contemporary youth culture, I return to the work of du Gay et al. (2003). I will use an articulation model that connects 'disparate elements together that form a temporary unity' (du Gay et al., 2003: 3). By connecting different elements, the complexity of how the activity of people telling stories in SNSs must be understood as not only social but also material and cultural will become clear. The aim of the model here is to transcend one-sided utopian or dystopian critiques in relation to mediated storytelling.

The model (see Figure 1) brings together *Representation*, *Technology*, the *Subject* and *Participation*. However, the actual processes involved in social media such as SNSs are better understood in combining the concepts of *Representation*, *Technology*, the *Subject* and *Participation*. Combinations can be found around two mediation axes: the *Media Institutional axis* and the *Audiences' axis*. By explaining the processes involved in SNSs around these two axes, it will become clear how intimate storytelling can be analysed in social media environments.



## Audiences' Axis

Audiences in SNSs are complex collectives, as they not only interpret texts but also discuss, negotiate and produce content themselves. Further, the audiences in SNSs are organised in networked structures. Networked systems connect people in organised structures that are not neutral but reflect power structures. For example, certain nodes within the network are more connected and central than others (Barabási, 2011). Moreover, because of these particular organised structures that allow users to communicate, like or dislike their stories, audiences can interpellate and/or surveil their own members.

To understand current audience activity demands a stronger connection with the theoretical complexities behind participation (Livingstone, in press). With the emergence of new media technologies, the *opportunity structures for participation* changed (Cammaerts, 2012). As mentioned earlier, participation does not imply a power shift but is better understood as a hybrid practice, oscillating between minimal/maximal (Carpentier, 2011a) or implicit/explicit (Schäfer, 2011) participation. Carpentier understands SNSs as 'organizations aimed at facilitating access and interaction' rather than facilitating participation. Consequently, participation is to be understood as being simultaneously enabled and repressed by technology (Schäfer, 2011). Opportunity structures for participation will be understood here as allowing youth to create stories *independently* from content providing mass media. This opportunity is directly linked to the emergence of new technologies such as the computer, the Internet and software.

Participation in 'social' media leads audiences to engage with 'a set of semiotic practices' such as texts, photos, music and videos, all remixed and reorganised of existing media (Drotner, 2008). These converged media practices create ongoing representations that are shaped by identity *performances* through digital storytelling and specific networked activities (e.g. pictures, introductory texts, commenting, adding friends). Besides understanding these identity performances as self-created biographies (Livingstone, 2008), they should be seen as *subjects* that identify within dominant discourses and power regimes. As Cover (2012) sums up, 'Aspects of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace can thus said to be tools *par excellence* by which to perform as a coherent subject in a process over time [emphasis in original]'. Here, the notion of *performativity*, which explains how identities are constructed through reiterative practices, is useful in an SNS context (Cover, 2012; Van Doorn, 2009). Self-representational storytelling must therefore always be seen within cultural norms and social constraints. Moreover, this reintroduces the symbolic power to represent certain identities within certain regimes of representation in an SNS (Mainsah, 2011).

Although people are telling stories in media, they are still collectives working with media text; therefore, the notion of audience is still an important analytical concept. What are changed are the increased opportunity structures for participation, allowing users to use networked technologies such as the Internet. I described how subjects manage identities through performative acts in SNSs. As



the opportunity structures of participation have a strong link with technology and participation, performativity has a strong link with subjectivity and representation. As this identity project pursues cultural and social intelligibility, it needs to be understood within the regime of heteronormativity. However, the same opportunities for participation also have the ability to 'undo' and expose the repetitive practices through which heteronormative subject positions are maintained in everyday life (cf. *supra*). Therefore, the content of social media platforms can be understood in what Hall termed a '*politics of representation*', a struggle over meaning which continues and is unfinished' (Hall, 1997: 277).

## Media Institutional Axis

The media institution focuses on the role of the new cultural industries that have also undergone a shift from being producers of cultural content to producers of platforms that make social interactions possible.

*In the cultural industries, traditional companies not only adapt and attempt to change business models accordingly or develop new ways of earning revenues; it is also evident that new enterprises emerge and gain control over cultural production and intellectual property in a manner very similar to the monopolistic media corporations of the 20th century.*

(Schäfer, 2011: 11)

This shift in the cultural industry is often misunderstood in academic research and the broader public. In particular, critical studies of media and technology warn of the overly optimistic discourses surrounding web 2.0 and participation (Schäfer, 2011; Fuchs, 2011; Carpentier, 2011b). A critical theory of technology, as Feenberg (2012: 3) understands it, 'emphasizes the political structuring of the world emerging under the impact of the Internet'. Technology is seen as 'co-constructed by the social forces it organizes and unleashes'. Therefore, storytelling on an SNS must, in relation to technology, be understood as co-created by the *software design*.

Affordances are the material or technical capacities of a technology, and although without claiming a deterministic view of technology, they are not simply what humans make of them (Hutchby, 2001). SNSs are made available through the technology of the computer that is connected with the Internet network. Further, these connected computers have the capacity to run software that makes it possible to navigate through the machine and thereby also enable communication and participation. Designers who shape this software are constrained by certain organisational and economic structures but also by the force of the technological momentum (Taylor, 2003: 26). Software is produced through coding language and other software programs that have built-in templates. Therefore, software is also highly intertextual in contemporary culture (Schäfer, 2011: 66).



Further, the *user appropriation* of these technologies, which connects with participation and the subject through articulation, is equally important. People who interact with these software structures and affordances do not have to appropriate it as prescribed and can thereby resist power constructed through the algorithm. This resistance could be ignoring certain online forms to fill in or actually adapting, hacking and modifying media technologies. Moreover, Mackay and Gillespie (1992) understand the actual meaning the technology has for the user as an important aspect for understanding user appropriation.

The media institutional and technological axis showed how interactions in social media can be understood in a dialectic between affordances and software design on the one hand and user appropriation on the other. Representation and participation in SNSs are shaped through technology, and power/knowledge is distributed through these software algorithms. For example, feminist theories of technology have already argued how technology is gendered (Wajcman, 2010) and therefore not neutral. However, as people use these technologies, they are able to appropriate them in different ways, not always following the intended purposes of the software design. Exposing this struggle between design and appropriation is the central aim of a critical theory of technology. Today, the political significance of software and the way in which users appropriate this is not to be ignored when understanding the cultural and social significance of SNSs in everyday life.

<sup>2</sup> Sexual citizenship is a concept introduced by Weeks (1998). Intimate citizenship was introduced by Plummer (1995, 2003).

## INTIMATE/SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP

*The usefulness of seeing sexuality as shaped in culture is that it allows us to recognize the contingency and arbitrariness of our own social arrangements. It does not, however, tell us how we should live today.*

(Weeks, 2010: 124)

In these concluding paragraphs of the theoretical section, I want to elaborate on my own position on youth and mediated intimacy in SNSs. Here, I am strongly influenced by Ken Plummer and Jeffrey Weeks, two distinguished scholars in the field of sexuality and intimacy. As previously argued, in contemporary culture, intimate practices are inextricably intertwined with digital media in youth cultures. Intimacies today are lived and organised with and around digital media. Organised by software templates offered by media institutions, the potentially public digital stories told in these environments have a social, cultural and political significance. As Plummer (1995) already emphasised the importance of sexual stories over a decade ago, I want to argue for the political recognition of the redundant intimate stories told in digital culture, creating meaning in the everyday lives of youth. The potentially public nature of these intimate stories brings the importance of an intimate and sexual citizenship in the current youth culture to the fore.

Sexual/intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003; Plummer, 1995; Weeks, 1998)<sup>2</sup> is 'about belonging, about rights and responsibilities, about ending social exclusion and ensuring social inclusion' (Weeks, 2010: 125). I see this connected with a queer political project, which demands more open identities and rebukes restrictive membership. Although the intimate citizenship project can be used as a tool for sociological analysis, it also brings ideas of *how* to live our lives in new 'pluralized public spheres' (Plummer, 2003: 139). As the Internet and SNSs can be thought of as emerging semi-public spheres, the necessity of an open and pluralised doing of intimacy online is evident. The potential for this intimate/sexual citizenship to radiate in SNSs depends on the possibility of a more critical media literacy that I consider more and more important. Further, this media literacy project is a responsibility of different actors, which are primarily to be identified from the mediation axes determined earlier.

A first responsibility is to be found around the media/technology axis. Türkoğlu (2011: 153) argues to 'promote and strengthen the social and democratic responsibility of media professionals'. Media professionals that create content providing platforms today should be aware of the social and cultural implications and therefore be more reflexive about their work. Particularly, it should be emphasised how social bonds are changing and evolving through their new media platforms and how intimate identities are increasingly shaped around their products. Further, the audiences and (networked) publics themselves are responsible for being inclusive of other non-heteronormative identities.

<sup>3</sup> The following newspapers and magazines where used: *De Morgen*, *De Standaard*, *De Tijd*, *Gazet Van Antwerpen*, *Het Belang van Limburg*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, *Klasse*, *Knack* and *Trends*. All articles were collected before August 2012.

## METHOD

### Data Collection

This research is an observation into the media practice of intimate storytelling in a popular SNS, specifically analysing and/or exposing how these intimate narratives are important for social and cultural identities in everyday life. The method of ‘observation’, more commonly known as ‘participant observation’, is a well-established method in qualitative and interpretative research (Silverman, 2010). Further, ‘observation’ is mostly linked to the broad field of anthropology and ethnographic studies. However, this research will situate itself within the field of audience studies. In this field of study, participant observation is primarily used to understand the everyday contexts of media in the lives of people, inspired by the work of cultural media studies scholars (Schrøder et al., 2003).

For this participatory observation, I created a profile on the SNS Netlog. In November 2010, I contacted schools and youth movements and recruited Flemish teenagers between 13 and 18 years of age to ‘friend’ my profile. I maintained the profile for 18 months to fully familiarize myself with the online world. I followed what people were posting and how they were interacting from a distance. Although I limited my own participation as much as possible, I was more than an ‘invisible’ observer. I made a truthful profile, defining myself in the introductory text of the profile as a 25-year-old male academic researcher from Ghent.

To contextualise this observation, I found it necessary to get to know Netlog as a media institution using more than merely my own experiences on the website. Therefore, I not only collected the information on the Netlog website (which gives details about the website for potentially interested advertisers, application designers and so on) but also collected all newspaper and magazine articles referring to Netlog, using the Mediargus (<http://www.mediargus.be/>) database that monitors the Flemish press.<sup>3</sup> In addition, I met a considerable number of youngsters that did not want to use Netlog and therefore could not participate in my research. I asked several of them to write down why, getting a limited idea that I could use as context to understand why Netlog is not popular among all Flemish teens.

### Data Analysis

Analysing the data proved a real challenge. Determining how to get to know the Flemish youngsters’ online lives at the start of this research project was the first challenge that forced me to deal with the specific characteristics of the online youth culture, particularly its rules and practices. My research profile connected me with youngsters between 13 and 18 years old. A great deal was going on within that semi-public and networked environment, continuous activities that centred on connecting, shar-

<sup>4</sup> I incorporated the indicated age, gender, sexuality and love status, looking for categories as indicated within the software.

ing and creating, and the specific language that was used to interact took some time to decode. Understanding the conventions of the network and the particular ways of communicating was one of the biggest challenges. However, what immediately became clear was that a considerable number of these activities were significant for understanding contemporary gender practices, sexual identities and intimate life worlds in youth cultures.

To analyse intimate storytelling and the corresponding social and cultural identity formations in-depth, I chose to depart from the theoretical understanding of how heterosexual subject positions are lived in everyday life (cf. *supra*). Thereby, I approached the concept of heteronormativity as a sensitising concept (see also Goltz). Figure 2 shows how the Netlog profile was seen as the ‘data pool’ where data was selected, further organised and saved for more in-depth analysis.

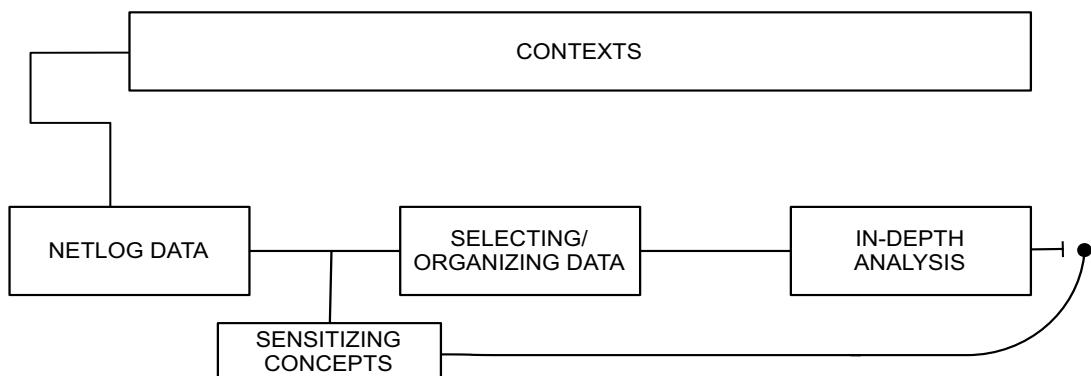


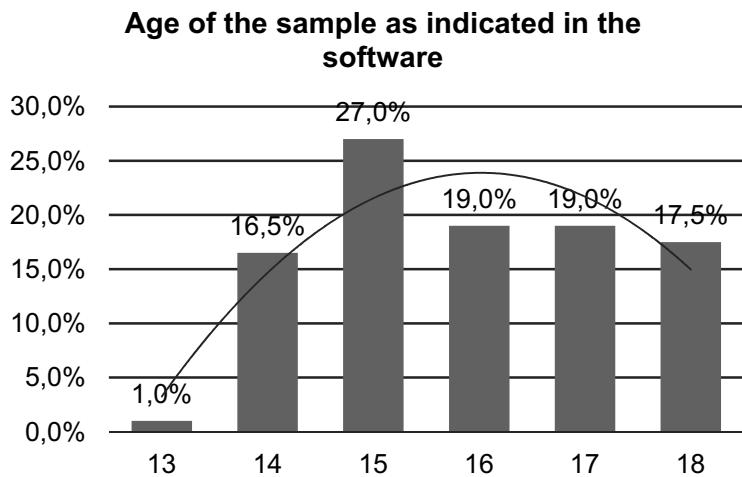
FIGURE 2: *Analysing intimate storytelling on Netlog*

For this specific research, I saved 200 main profile pages in offline documents. In this way, I created a stable sample (see Figures 3 and 4, p. 37). To further organise and explore the data, I used a quantitative content analysis as an explorative inventory combined with a qualitative textual analysis (Van Zoonen, 1994). Quantitative analysis was used here to interpret the ‘frequency and prominence of particular textual properties’ (Schrøder, 2002: 102), creating an overview and discovering certain patterns in the intimate storytelling.

## Quantitative content analysis

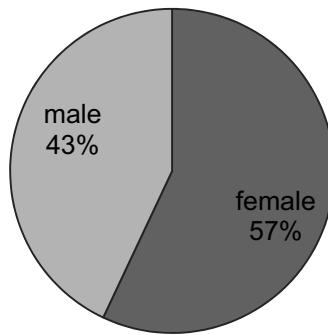
For the quantitative content analysis, I created variables for the information the youngsters indicated into the software design of the SNS.<sup>4</sup> Further, I developed a set of categories for the coding of the main semiotic practices that can be found on the profile pages of Netlog. The coding gives a standardised comparison of where (in the nicknames, pictures or texts) references to intimacy can be

<sup>5</sup> The exact coding categories were as follows: not present, no reference to intimacy, reference to intimacy, heterosexual reference to intimacy, non-heterosexual reference to intimacy.



**FIGURE 3: Age of the Netlog users on the research profile (N 200)**

**Indicated gender within the software**



**FIGURE 4: Gender of the Netlog users on the research profile (N 200)**

found. In addition, the coding provides insights into whether these references to intimacy are explicitly heterosexual or non-heterosexual.<sup>5</sup> In order to generate frequencies of the coded categories, SPSS 20 was used.

## Qualitative textual analysis

While the quantitative analysis was performed to provide an overview of the data, the main point of this inquiry lies within the qualitative textual analysis, which exposes the struggles over how intimate



stories are produced and reproduced. Intimate storytelling was analysed by *locating* how the intimate stories were produced socially (i.e. analysing them as social narratives created for an intended audience). This localisation focused on the social shaping of intimate identities. Further, the textual analysis also *dislocated* the intimate stories by subjecting them to a queer critique, inspired by the praxis of deconstruction. This critical approach exposes where cultural norms operate and how identities are produced within discourse rather than in a social process. A dislocation focuses on 'structural silences' (Kellner, 1995), binary oppositions and the performative reproductions of heteronormative identities and institutions.

<sup>6</sup> The contextual information here was assembled by collecting all articles on Netlog published in Flemish newspapers and magazines (*De Morgen, De Standaard, De Tijd, Gazet Van Antwerpen, Het Belang van Limburg, Het Laatste Nieuws, Het Nieuwsblad, Klasse, Knack and Trends*). The Netlog website was also used as a source of information.

<sup>7</sup> All quotes in this working paper have been translated from Dutch.

## NETLOG AS MEDIA INSTITUTION

### Netlog as Highly Targeted and Glocalised Social Internet Medium<sup>6</sup>

The SNS Netlog is part of the coordinating company Massive Media. Massive Media was established in 2011, primarily to face the new challenges on the SNS market that since 2010 was completely dominated by Facebook in Flanders, Europe and beyond. Massive Media is based in Ghent, Belgium, but has offices in London and Dubai. The story of Netlog is one of rapid growth but of even faster decline. Tom Coppens and Lorenzo Bogaert, two young Internet entrepreneurs, founded Netlog in 2003. Coppens and Bogaert developed two SNSs: Redbox and Facebox. In 2007, Netlog appeared as the brand name for the SNS that the two would further develop into a European success story. In 2009, Netlog was number nine worldwide in the social media category of highest valued websites. Netlog differentiated itself on four important aspects, creating a unique selling proposition for its (potential) members and advertisers:

- 1) Netlog targeted itself very specifically at youth 14 to 24.
- 2) Although the website is active in Europe, Asia, the US and the Arabic countries, it is highly adapted to local cultures and specific regions.
- 3) In contrast to Facebook, it markets itself as a platform to get to know *new* people.
- 4) Brands are highly integrated on Netlog; Netlog publics interact with brand pages and become brand ambassadors.

Although these four aspects were Netlog's strengths in the beginning, each contributed in a way to its decline in 2010 (cf. infra). Analysts saw the increasing popularity of Facebook as the main reason. Because of 'network effects', SNSs reinforce their own popularity. When friends and contacts move to another network, social pressure to follow is thereby ineluctable. In the Flemish context, youngsters also declared that they chose Facebook because of this particular 'network effect'.

*I use Facebook, because all my friends do. (Girl, 17)<sup>7</sup>*

*I have Facebook, and you should not have two profiles. (Boy, 16)*

Today (May 2012), Netlog is, after this period of decline, again stable. Further, Massive Media started a new project that resulted from Netlog. Coppens and Bogaerts developed Twoo, a dating site for an older demographic than that at which Netlog was initially aimed. In July 2011, in the Flemish financial newspaper *De Tijd*, Bogaerts declared that it was time to start from scratch. In the interview, he acknowledged that the fact that Netlog was often used for matchmaking was his inspiration for integrating the dating platform. Today, the Netlog network reinforces Twoo, which is among the top five dating sites worldwide.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Netlog is strong in the Arabic countries, as it has a specific function to indicate 'I am Muslim'. If indicated, the website automatically changes the privacy settings to a stricter level. To develop these regional designs and site functions, Netlog uses a large network of community managers familiar with the local cultures of the regions where the website is active.

<sup>9</sup> The Apestaartjaren reports are published every two years by the Flemish Network for Youth Movements (*Jeugddienst en Jeugdnetwerk*). The reports contain results from a large-scale quantitative survey into the new media use of Flemish teenagers. This research is executed by the research group for Media and ICT (MICT) at Ghent University. The 2010 and 2012 reports can be found here: <http://www.apestaartjaren.be/node/585>

## The Use of Netlog among Flemish Youth

As previously explained, Netlog is active worldwide, with a strong focus on Europe. However, I will focus on the Flemish case, and more specifically on the use of Netlog by Flemish teenagers between 14 and 18 years old. Netlog is a strong example of the further developing ‘global-local nexus’. Although globally active, it is regionally embedded and takes into account the particular social and cultural dynamics of the different regions<sup>8</sup> (Robins, 1997). Netlog uses a strong localisation technology, developed in such a way that every network experience is personalised and is focused around the user’s region, language, profile and age (Netlog, n.d.).

In 2010, when I started the observational research on Netlog, the website was very popular among Flemish teens between 14 and 18 years old. The *Apestaartjaren*<sup>9</sup> report of 2010 reported that 74% of Flemish teens had an account on Netlog. Further, Netlog was reported as being the second most popular website that teenagers indicated to visit most frequently. Although the popularity decreased as the report of 2012 showed, as a favourite website, Netlog still ranks fourth among Flemish youngsters. However, more important is the use of Netlog among Flemish teenagers. While in 2010, the network dominated, the 2012 results showed that only 22% logged in on Netlog in the month before the research. Netlog is most popular among the younger demographic, but as teenagers get older, they leave Netlog for other SNSs, mostly Facebook in the Flemish case (Jeugddienst and Jeugdwerknet, 2012). Further, girls in general are far more active in all social media activities (Ibid).

The non-use of Netlog depends on different factors that I will not discuss exhaustively but will rather convey with examples. As mentioned previously, the ‘network effects’ of Facebook (cf. *supra*) are certainly important. In addition, some youngsters noted a general concern regarding engaging in SNSs, describing it as an ‘unsafe practice’ or ‘dangerous for your privacy’. These comments reflected the societal discourse on the potential dangers of using SNSs. The following quotations come from youngsters that, during my search for participants in the current research, offered to write down why they did not want to have a Netlog account (see methodology section on data collection):

*I don't think it is necessary to have. Because of privacy, it is not safe. (Girl, 16)*

Further, some youngsters indicated that they saw Netlog as a highly sexualised environment and thereby considered it a low-class medium:

*Netlog is for sluts and playboys. (Boy, 16)*

*I deleted it; too many false accounts, old dirty men and little kids, and it is boring. (Girl, 15)*

In addition, some youngsters indicated that they were prohibited from using Netlog by authorities such as parents or, as indicated in the example, family members such as nephews.

*Yes, I cannot have it. My nephew forbids it, and it is boring. (Girl, 14)*

*I cannot have it because of my parents. (Boy, 15)*

10 The different blocks users can add include the following: Pictures, Profile updates (the software lists all recent activity), Blog, Friends, Videos, Guest Book, Shouts (to 'shout' something to the Netlog network), Slideshow (creates a slideshow of the added pictures), Polls (ask a question to the visitors and organise a poll), Games, Twoo (a dating application that is linked to the Twoo dating website).

11 For Netlog, this information is, published or not, important for targeting advertisements to specific audiences. The more information known, the more specific and thus valuable it is for brands to advertise on Netlog.

The screenshot shows the Netlog homepage with the following elements:

- Header:** NETLOG logo, navigation menu (Explore, Beheer, Logs, Vrienden 1, Games, Dating, Nieuw), search bar, and user status (C\_L\_M\_S online, Instellingen - afdelen).
- Top banner:** A yellow button with the text "meld je gratis aan en bespaar € 29,95 >" (Sign up for free and save € 29,95).
- Advertisement:** Weight Watchers Online logo.
- Welcome message:** Welkom, Centre for Cinema and Media ....
- Friends section:** "Foto's van je vrienden" (Photos of your friends) with a grid of friend photos and names (Xkevienpict..., Xkevienpict..., Xkevienpict..., Xkevienpict..., Isabelle, Sarah, Arne Verbanck, Arne Verbanck, Arne Verbanck). A "Volledigheid profiel" (Profile completeness) bar is at 71%.
- Friends log:** "Vriendenlog" section showing friend activity: Arne Verbanck and amelyy zijn nu vrienden (Arne Verbanck and amelyy are now friends), Arne Verbanck en -Lori zijn nu vrienden (Arne Verbanck and -Lori are now friends), [Sarah.] ~ily en loic lefeuvre zijn nu vrienden ([Sarah.] ~ily and loic lefeuvre are now friends), CrazyMaxiMonkey viert haar verjaardag vandaag! (CrazyMaxiMonkey celebrates her birthday today!), Isabelle en ~' eLize. zijn nu vrienden (Isabelle and ~' eLize. are now friends).
- Blog section:** "Blogberichten van je vrienden" (Blog posts from your friends) showing a post by [Sarah.] ~ily: "gescreven door: [Sarah.] ~ily vrijdag, 28 september 2012 om 21:06" (written by [Sarah.] ~ily on Friday, September 28, 2012 at 21:06).
- Advertisements:** "Onze online spaarrekening" (Our online savings account) with a woman and a piggy bank, ING Lion Premium boelje aan, and a "5 credits" section.

FIGURE 5: The Netlog homepage ([www.netlog.be](http://www.netlog.be))

These examples are not unique to SNSs, but media use in general is dependent on power structures. Particularly, in everyday family life, youngsters' media use is restricted by authoritative figures such as parents as well as other family members (Adriaens, 2011).

The restrictions on interacting on Netlog noted by these youngsters are in a way linked to the specific genre of the SNS (referring to the societal media panic to the more mediated and therefore often public nature of teenage social life). However, the different concerns regarding using the site are consequences of three of the four unique selling propositions of Netlog (cf. *supra*), which allow people to primarily connect to *new* and *young* people in their *region*. Although not intended, the website indeed grew out to a network known for dating, and unwanted grooming became one of the challenges Netlog had to face. These unique selling propositions also reflected the design Netlog used for the website, which is introduced in the next section.

## **The Netlog Design**

As the website is specifically aimed at youth, the design is particularly adapted to attract this age group. The layout of the website is rather colourful, and it allows more 'creative' content creation (i.e. more 'fun' features such as applications to play games, add polls to the profile and so on). This is organised within an easy-to-use and strict software template rather than the more business-like design used in the SNS Facebook or the more open template used in MySpace.

To interact on the website, users must provide their e-mail address, first name, sex, date of birth and password. More information can be added, but this is optional. Further, the software continuously motivates users to expand upon the basic data and build a 'complete' profile including pictures, text, personalised layout and so on. Users can manage their profiles using different building blocks that they can choose to add or remove. If a block is added to the profile, users can add data, or the software automatically updates and provides it with information.<sup>10</sup> When users provide additional information, they can choose whether to publish it on the profile.<sup>11</sup> Information on users' professional and personal lives can be added (company, hobby, student, etc.) as well as information on what they are 'looking for' (friendship, business, relationship, etc.). A love status can be selected from a list with ten options (Almost there..., In love, I'm not going to tell you!, Married, Been through a lot, I need a break, Partnered, Single, Engaged, Dating). Further, users can specify their sexual identity by completing the statement 'I'm falling for...' with male and/or female. In addition, users can write an introductory text to the profile that can be 'pimped' with colourful smileys.

As Netlog is a website aimed at getting to know new people and maintaining a network of 'friends', it has some specific functions to support this. People who interact on the website can 'shout' their status to the public. Moreover, blog entries, pictures and videos can be made more public by using the

<sup>12</sup> Netlog allows users to 'explore' profiles and look for a specific gender, age and location.

'spotlight' function, whereby Netlog promotes the entry on the main page. However, shouted and spotlight items are, because of the localisation technology (cf. *supra*), made public to specific groups of people within the network beyond the control of the user. Further, the activities of 'friends' are surveable in a special 'log' section.

The integration of brands also creates specific participation structures. On Netlog, brands act in a very personalised way. Brands have profile pages on Netlog; thereby, it is possible to 'friend' a brand and interact with it. As brands are friends, they are inextricably linked to the online identity of the person whereby the user becomes a brand 'ambassador'. Further, it is possible to lay out the profile with a 'skin' that is designed by the brand.

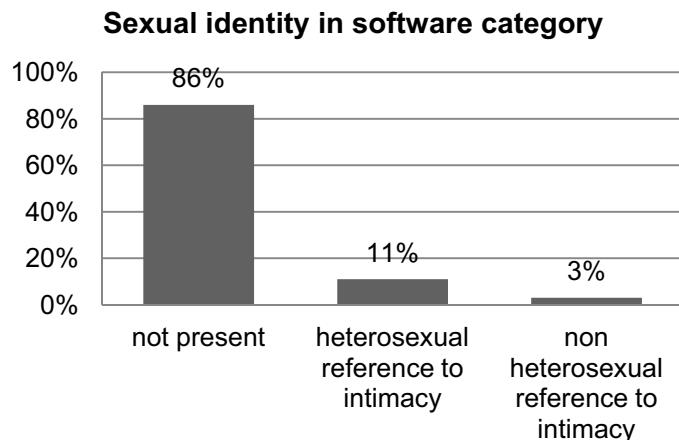
As has been shown, Netlog's unique selling propositions are connected with specific design choices that allow people to interact and create an identity on the online network. Netlog is a glocalised medium and a very structured website, which makes it easy to use the platform. However, the overview of the functionalities here was not exhaustive. Netlog has other functions such as interpersonal communication; searching for other 'specific'<sup>12</sup> users; and commenting on blog entries, pictures and videos, among others. Among Flemish youngsters, Netlog is a popular website. However, since 2010-2011, the Facebook hegemony has been challenging its popularity. Further, the public discourse on Netlog is rather negative. This is partly because of general concerns with the SNS genre and partly because of the specific selling propositions and connected design features of the Netlog website.

<sup>13</sup> Five exclusive codes were used: not present, no reference to intimacy, reference to intimacy, heterosexual reference to intimacy, non-heterosexual reference to intimacy.

## INTIMATE SELF-REPRESENTATIONS

The current section focuses on self-representations of intimacy in the investigated network (more specifically, in relation to identity, understanding how the performances are struggles to create intelligible intimate identities) (cf. *supra*). The focus here is on self-representations created by the studied public. Basic semiotic practices on the main profile pages were chosen and coded to see if there were any references to intimacy and, if so, if these were explicitly heterosexual or explicitly non-heterosexual.<sup>13</sup> Further, the intimate practices were analysed more in-depth using textual analysis (cf. the methodology section). The presentation of the results is organised in two parts. The first includes those semiotic practices that organise representation through simple software categories (i.e. choosing an option from a list). The second includes the more compound representational tools such as nicknames, pictures and self-introductory texts.

### Intimate Software Categories

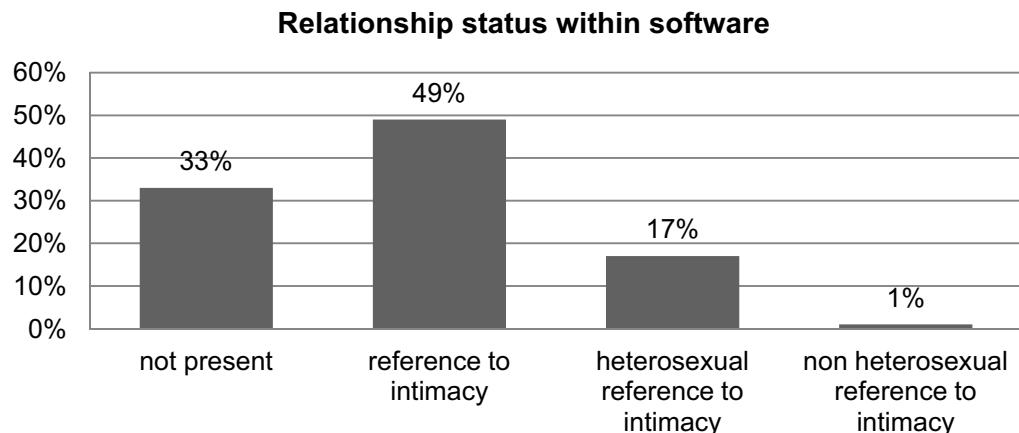


**FIGURE 6: Sexual identity as indicated within the Netlog software – November 2010 (N 200)**

In SNSs, sexual identity is often indicated in software categories. In the Netlog design, it is possible to indicate if the user 'is falling for' boys, girls or boys and girls. As Figure 6 shows, sexual identity is *not* indicated by the majority (86%). Of the youngsters in the sample, 3% define themselves as non-heterosexual.

Relationship statuses (Figure 7, p. 51) were indicated more often. The majority indicated being in a relationship but *without* explicitly defining if this relationship was heterosexual (49%). Further, two teens (1%) indicated being in a non-heterosexual relationship. Next to these relationships statuses,





**FIGURE 7: Relationship status as indicated within the Netlog software – November 2010 (N 200)**

22% also indicated they were specifically looking for 'love'. Looking at the represented intimacy in these software categories, it is evident that youngsters do not automatically identify with a sexual identity. Relationships are clearly important, as the majority indicated being in one. However, again, it was not automatically specified whether these relationships were heterosexual.

Nevertheless, those software categories do not say much about the representation of intimacy, as the profiles themselves provide more suitable and complex opportunities to tell stories about sexual identities and relationships. Social identities are often indicated more implicitly, as George\_Julien (Boy, 17) did by not defining his sexuality but by being a member of different GLBT youth groups on Netlog and publishing this on his main page. More interesting is how these software categories are used intelligibly, seeking coherence between gender, desire and sexual identity (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1: Intelligibility in software categories (\* p<.01 \*\* p<.05)**

Sexuality defined within software	% within female	% within male	% within people indicated to be looking for a relationship	% within people indicated not to be looking for a relationship
yes	8,8**	19,8**	25,6*	10,2*
no	91,2**	80,2**	40,7*	89,8*

In the use of these software categories, there is a connection between gender and the defining of sexual identity. Considerably more boys (19,8%) define their sexuality than girls (8,8%). The reason why boys are more interested in defining a clear and stable sexual identity by using these software categories can be understood in how a hegemonic masculinity regulates the subordination of homosexuality (Connell, 2005). Moreover, a clear and stable masculinity is connected to and created



through sexual identity (Butler, 1990). Somehow, this definition in software categories represents a stable heterosexual identity and intelligible masculinity. Further, defining a clear and stable sexual identity connects significantly with indicating ‘to be looking for a relationship’. More users who are looking for a relationship (25,6%) define their sexuality than users who are not looking for a relationship (10,2%). There could be multiple reasons for this; it is not possible to argue that this is a performative act, but it does represent an intelligible selfhood (Cover, 2012). It represents a clear and stable sexuality to be connected to an intimate relationship.

Liu (2007) described how in the SNS MySpace, cultural interests are performances of taste connected to the notion of cultural capital by Bourdieu. He argued that cultural interests in SNSs are connected to differentiation and prestige. Liu did not incorporate intimate taste performances such as love status, relationships and sexual identity, although *intimate taste performances* are important building blocks for identity. I observed how the youngsters in my Netlog research used them intelligibly, connecting gender, desire and sexual identity. Intimate taste performances in software categories are *performative fixing tools par excellence*. They represent intimate identities and practices within the heterosexual matrix. However, as in defining sexual identity, they are not used automatically and thus leave room for struggle and undoing identity. Social identifying is often done more implicitly in SNS profiles. I will come back to the relation between the appropriation and design in these software categories (cf. Infra).

## Compound Self-Representations

The more compound self-representational tools that can be found on the Netlog main pages all contain references to intimacy (see Table 2) (i.e. referring to love, sexuality or eroticism). Intimate stories told in texts (41%) are far more common than in other incorporated semiotic practices. In what follows, I will introduce each semiotic practice separately and provide a more in-depth analysis of how these stories live in ‘flows of power’ and are part of a ‘political process’ (Plummer, 1995: 26).

**TABLE 2: References to intimacy in Netlog main pages**

	All	% within all
Nicknames	16	8
Pictures	24	12
Texts	82	41

<sup>14</sup> MUDs (Multi-user dungeons) are role-playing games on the Internet that were popular in the 1990s (Baym, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> In Dutch, meaning ‘jordi\_football player’.

<sup>16</sup> In Dutch, referring to the phrase ‘menstrual cycle’.

## Nicknames

A name can be seen as an important signal of identity. In SNSs such as Facebook and LinkedIn, authentic names are used, as these websites want to emanate 'trust' (Baym, 2010). However, Netlog is more 'playful', and choosing a nickname is mandatory to interact and navigate through the network. On Netlog, every user is identified through his or her nickname, gender and profile picture, all assembled in an 'avatar'. Avatars stem from the 1990s and were used in anonymous environments to express one's identity using a 'graphical body', particularly in online games such as MUD<sup>14</sup> environments. Therefore, the Netlog avatar is not equal to the 'historic' avatar, but the purpose is the same; it is an image that others get to see when interacting with the person in the network (Thomas, 2007). Nicknames are public and unique across the entire network.

TABLE 3: *References to intimacy in nicknames*

	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
no reference to intimacy	184	92	92
reference to intimacy	13	6,5	98,5
heterosexual reference to intimacy	2	1,0	99,5
non-heterosexual reference to intimacy	1	,5	100
Total	200	100	

Nicknames mostly referred to the personal identity of the user, modifying the first name, indicating a personal identity to interact in the Netlog network (e.g. 'AaRrON\_', 'Fieenn\_', 'Jonas837', 'Kjell\_DeMaeschalk\_3A7', 'marietjeuu'). In addition, a large group of users referred to social identities when choosing a nickname. These cultural signifiers expressed gendered identities such as 'Light\_Angel', 'jordi\_voetballer',<sup>15</sup> 'menstruatiecyclus',<sup>16</sup> 'xX\_ThEe\_ReaL\_a4Xi3\_BaRbi3\_Xx', 'Mister\_Kevin' and 'fashionshiousxXxEllen'. Further, ethnic identities such as 'MAGREBB\_united', 'xLatinaaa', '25\_P3RSIANcMANQ4N\_24' and 'AsianXproductions' were also expressed in nicknames.

Nicknames were also used to express intimate identities (see Table 3). References to intimacy (6,5%) referred to a relationship and/or love affair (e.g. 'Love.my.darling.4ever', 'hypnotized\_of\_you', 'Youmakemylife\_') but also to the self as an intimate and sexual subject (e.g. 'xanderrrraauuuwtcch', 'FamousLover\_x'). Further, explicit references to heterosexual relationships (2%) were made by indicating both lovers' names (e.g. 'CharlotteNick'). In one case (0,5%), a nickname referred to a sexual identity: 'G\_Star\_Pot'. In Dutch, 'Pot' is a slang word for lesbian corresponding with 'dyke'. Therefore, this nickname referred to a lesbian identity. Since non-heterosexual identities were otherwise not represented within the nicknames, this obvious labelling can be read as a strategic identity claim, which immediately makes this girl recognisable as a lesbian within a heterosexual majority.



Nicknames referring to minorities, such as in the cases of ethnicity and sexuality, represent themselves in opposition to the 'standard' identities within the network. As for sexual identity, this is heterosexual. This online 'coming-out' is—as understood by Munt, Basset and O'Riordan (2002)—an expression of a 'virtual belonging'. Moreover, this 'othering' represents a certain pride, whereby creating this identity in a public network such as an SNS might have a political and emancipatory function of acceptance. However, 'G\_Star\_Pot' also shows how this girl conforms to a socially intelligible identity by representing herself through the 'coded ideologies of a lesbian subculture' (Munt et al., 2002: 136).

On Netlog, nicknames are important for signalling identity, together with gender and the profile picture assembled in the Netlog 'avatar'. They function as primary markers of identification to communicate and navigate through the activities on the website. Generally, youngsters modify their given names to represent personal and 'authentic' identities. However, many use social identities such as gender, while others express ethnic or sexual otherness. Through nicknames, intimate identities are expressed, referring to relationships or the self as a sexual subject. Youngsters clearly show in nicknames that they have knowledge of the different identity politics and thereby know how to use them (Mainsah, 2011). Nicknames are clear performative constructs, adopting the political struggle of a reflexive self that is bounded by an intelligible script.

### *Pictures*

As shown in Table 4, most pictures do not refer to intimacy as defined in this research; rather, they refer to love or more erotic aspects of social life. Pictures mostly centred on the *gendered* self, focusing on the body. In addition, pictures showed the youngsters as social beings, having fun with friends and, mostly for girls, posing together in the mirrors of bathrooms and bedrooms. These self-shots show how the camera itself becomes an important extension of the body, blurring the line between producer and subject (Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011: 270). Whether in the bathroom, at an event or at school, cameras are never too far away to capture shared experiences that are made public in SNS environments.

**TABLE 4: *References to intimacy in pictures***

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Cumulative %</b>
no reference to intimacy	177	88,5	88,5
reference to intimacy	8	4	92,5
heterosexual reference to intimacy	15	7,5	100
non-heterosexual reference to intimacy	0	0	100
Total	200	100	



Pictures were often very conventional and produced to fit within the stereotypical male vs. female dichotomous regimes of representation. Visual performances of femininity mostly showed the feminine body as fragmented in close-up, focusing on the gaze, breasts and hips. Often, the girls were smiling, maintaining seductive and soft facial expressions while looking at the camera. Notably, the photos seemed rather professional, often adapted to soften the colours. Representations of the masculine body were generally less fragmented and used more medium-range shots and dark colours. When posing with male friends, this male bonding set larger distances between bodies. Most boys also promoted themselves by looking in the lens when posing. However, this gaze was often more dominant with more neutral and serious facial expressions. Boys often focused on the masculine athletic and muscular body, posing stripped to the waist.

References that were coded as referring to intimacy (4%) centred on the body but also used symbols of intimacy (such as broken hearts). In one case, a graphical object referring to a gay sexuality was used. Intimate bodies were representations that connected the person in the picture to the audience as intimate beings and sexual selves. Although boys also used intimate symbols on their profiles, representing the body by posing in an intimate way was mostly done by girls. Here, I could argue that girls passively perform the pleasure of the active male gaze as understood in classical feminist analysis, following Mulvay. However, as Mallan (2009: 64) argues on self-representations of youngsters in SNSs, '[T]he message might seem to be saying "look at me" but the reality is perhaps "look at us"'. Mendelson and Papacharissi (2011) argue that pictures in SNSs are a *collectively* performed form of narcissism. Rather than focusing on the individual girl that passively performs a to-be-looked-at-ness, it is a *collective act* to be understood within a larger visual youth culture. This literacy of posing, seducing and body positioning clearly refers to elements of popular culture such as video clips. Popular music videos were often inserted in the profiles, clearly corresponding with the girls' own creations.

More youngsters (15%) explicitly referred to heterosexual relationships. Mostly, the couples took pictures of themselves kissing and hugging. In these profiles, there was a clear shift from representation of the self to a profile that was centred on the couple. Pictures of couples were creative, often visually enriched with symbols such as red lips and hearts. The attention given to these relationships in pictures shows how SNSs are used to make the couple seem official and institutionalised for the intended audience.

*Youth in relationships need to leave public messages for and post pictures of their significant others. Doing so sends messages to their significant others about their dedication and to their digital public about the nature of the relationship.*

(Ito et al., 2010: 132)

Intimacy in profile pictures needs to be understood as a *collective act*. Rather than being centred on individual couples and seductive bodies, intimate profile pictures represent a self that primarily wants



to connect with *others*. Further, the representations these youngsters make concord with images in popular youth culture and thereby produce and reproduce what is intimate, sexual and fun. However, a large majority produced rather docile bodies, upholding and reinforcing the dominant cultural significations of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality. As these collective acts fit within a broader visual youth culture, it shows the performative nature and political signification of these pictures in SNSs. Although more playful gender identities were found, all were intelligible and thereby fit within the heterosexual matrix. These pictures are products of contemporary youth but also actively constitute it. The fact that we did not find any pictures of non-heterosexual couples is symptomatic of a larger heteronormative society.

However, I want to emphasise the importance of the homosocial here. Originally coined by Sedgwick, the homosocial is described as the feelings bonding and dividing people of the same gender. According to homosocial theory, there is no such thing as homosexual behaviour, and erotic or sexual behaviours are dependent on the context:

*Sedgwick strategically and powerfully rejected all of the then-available lexical and conceptual alternatives to challenge the idea that hetero-, bi- and homosexual men and experiences could be easily differentiated. They could not be distinguished readily from one another, she suggested, since what might be conceptualised as erotic depended on an unpredictable, ever-changing array of local factors.*

(Edwards, 2009: 33)

McCormack (2012) described how homosocial tactility creates more inclusive masculinities that not only redefine hegemonic masculinity but also reduce homophobia. Homosocial representations were neglected in the content analysis, as the homosocial is not per definition erotic or sexual. However, pictures of boys and girls that could be described as homosocial rather than sexual were present. The public nature of these pictures makes them important to acknowledge for their eroding potential.

### *Texts*

As Table 5 shows, youngsters prefer to use texts to tell intimate stories. Texts are not only easy to produce and alter; they allow more creativity than strict software categories in defining interests, relationships and sexual identities. A considerable number of these intimate texts were declarations of love. As previously discussed in the sub-section on pictures, in this way, the relationships were publicly displayed and therefore institutionalised. Some youngsters only briefly mentioned their relationships in the introductory texts (e.g. 'I love my girlfriend' (Boy, 18)), while others invested more and wrote creative messages to their love interest. Making intimate texts between two persons public is a regular practice on Netlog that can not only be found on the profiles main pages but also in sections where youngsters comment on pictures, videos and blog items. The following text is an example of this intimate storytelling practice:



*Honey, I love you to death!! (heart) You are my baby!!*

*Loving you is so easy.. It's something I do with all my heart, but missing you, that's so hard. You're always there..*

*Whatever I do, you have to know I'm always thinking of you!!!!!!*

*Steve (heart) Louise 08-08-09*

(Girl, 17)

**TABLE 5: References to intimacy in texts**

	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
not present	46	23	23
no reference to intimacy	72	36	59
reference to intimacy	40	20	79
heterosexual reference to intimacy	36	18	97
non-heterosexual reference to intimacy	6	3	100
Total	200	100	

Another practice in intimate storytelling is observed in what the teenagers called 'breaking in'. This is when a very close friend or lover enters the profile and writes a text about the person *on* the profile. Girls on Netlog often engage in breaking in to publically display their connections and the importance of their friendships. Boys do not engage in this practice, unless with their girlfriends. The following texts provide examples of the practice:

*Ambeeeeerr (heart) (hug)*

*Girl, I'm breaking in.*

*I want to say how much you mean to me,*

*We grew up together, we did everything together,*

*I felt so bad when I did not see you anymore!*

*But I'm so happy I found you again!*

*You are like the sun and the moon to me, you're my other half,*

*I love you my girl!*

(Girl, 15)

*Hi darling, I'm going to start with breaking in and all this tralala... Because everyone does it.... No TM.AMB.ABV*

*Whatever darling (heart) you are the best girl, I'm so happy that I've known you for so long. Yes Yes, it's almost a year girl! I don't wanna lose you anymore. Don't you know what you mean to me? You are fucking everything to me, you are always there for me (folks, I'm also there for her!!). You do everything for me and you're always there when I need you (heart). Really darling, I cannot imagine a better TM&AMB. But I think I'm gonna leave you here. Because you don't know I'm breaking in here. But ok, you should really know I miss you. During holidays, at school and in class, I will miss you too. It will be so different without you in class. Why didn't you choose the same school as me (sad face)... But everyone has to make their own choices darling, I understand & please now I do not wanna lose you, I love you to death Byyeee Loove Youuu (hug)*

(Girl, 14)



In order to break in and write these texts, the layout of the main page has to be adapted. Therefore, only individuals possessing the profile password can write these 'breaking in texts'. Sharing SNS passwords is a common intimate practice among teenagers (Ito et al., 2010); it shows how the relationship is based on trust. In the examples above, the text of the fifteen-year-old girl is written by another girl. Based on the context of the profile, they seem to be very good friends. In the other example, the boyfriend writes the text on the profile of the fourteen-year-old girl. Discourses in these intimate stories of friendship and love largely coincide. Intimate texts use powerful exclamations, hyperboles and emotional appeals to make the text 'unique' and stand out from the others. As seen in the text of the fourteen-year-old girl, the public nature is important. The producer of the text not only addresses the target of the text but also the wider public. Therefore, these stories are what I call mediated intimate battles. Here, the context of the SNS contributes to the development of intimate battles. As reiterated practices, constantly produced and reproduced in the observed online youth cultures, the stories are produced to not only connect but also differentiate between other intimate stories.

Texts often referred to popular culture by citing lyrics and poems about love and relationships. Recurrent themes were texts about 'a first love', how love hurts but is also beautiful, how you should be careful with love and how to cope with a 'lost love'. All these intimate texts represented the self as an intimate and sexual being, wanting to connect with others. Some indicated in the texts to be searching for love. In writing about intimacy, a considerable number of teens reflected on how to be love savvy, thereby also deconstructing love and beauty. Further, some youngsters emphasised that they were happy as singles and did not want to find a lover on Netlog.

*You know, boys think I want the most beautiful girl, but what is there about a girl who is the most beautiful of all but goes out with many different boys and perhaps does not even love you. Love is about loving a person for who he is, it is about your inner self, not about looks.*

(Boy, 15)

*Love is always patient and kind, never jealous, it is never rude or selfish, it takes no pleasure in wrongs...*

(Girl, 14)

*Love is a bitch, if you can't handle it... Don't even start.*

(Girl, 16)

Some youngsters in the sample referred to love and intimacy in a specific heterosexual way (18%), while a smaller proportion (3%) specifically referred to non-heterosexual intimacy. Heterosexual references cited lyrics and poems about typical boy/girl romances but also love statuses such as 'I love my girl'. In the texts, sexual identity was also clearly referred to as a demonstration of taste. Youngsters frequently used introductory texts to make lists about what they liked and/or disliked, thereby often incorporating sexual identity, as in the following example:



– Likes –

*Parties; RnB; My friends; The Oh; Cherrymoon; Bass events; Fashion; Tekstly; Love; Martinis; Girls; Gel; Bling; Wax; My car; Overpoort; Summer; Chillin'; TV; Food; My mobile*

(Boy, 18)

Sexual identity and ‘girls’ here become represented as a commodity between a popular drink (martini) and a hair product (gel). In addition, another boy incorporated the sentence ‘I’m not gay’ in his ‘likes’ list, showing how sexual identity can also be incorporated as a demonstration of what the youngsters dislike. Further, the majority that defined themselves as non-heterosexual (i.e. gay, lesbian or bisexual) primarily used this likes list to make their sexual interest public.

*\*Anna. \**

*\*.17. \**

*\*.Piercing: 2 Dermal. \**

*\*Gay. \**

*\*. Saxophone. \**

(Girl, 17)

Placing this sexual identity between information on appearance and hobbies contributes to the normalisation of gay identities. However, this method of representing could also be used to exclude sexual identities, as seen in the example. As the statement, ‘I’m not gay’ shows, depending on the context, these demonstrations of sexual preference function both to maintain and redefine heteronormativity.

Texts in the main profile pages were widely used to tell intimate stories resulting in intimate battles and demonstrations of sexual interest. Both show how the increased public and mediated nature of stories leads to more performative interactions in intimate youth cultures. Intimate stories flowing in youth cultures are increasingly and continuously reproduced, consumed and connected to publics. As the described stories reproduce heteronormativity but also redefine and deconstruct ideas about love, beauty and sexual identity, whether these increased performative reproductions are creating a more inclusive intimate citizenship is strongly dependent on different contexts and interpretations.



## PARTICIPATION THROUGH NETLOG AS MEDIA INSTITUTION

In the current section, following a critical theory of technology that exposes the struggles between design and appropriation (cf. *supra*), I will expose how participating in Netlog is to be understood as a hybrid practice between enabled and repressed opportunities to participate. Therefore, I will focus on the concepts of user appropriation and design that were elaborated upon in the circuit of social media culture.

### Netlog Design Critique

The design critique here will take Netlog as a case study, although it could also be applied to most of the popular SNSs today. The scope is a critical reflection on intimate culture, embedded within the tradition of feminist critiques of technology as well as cyberqueer critiques. Feminist perspectives on technology are mainly occupied with embodiment (more specifically, the extension of the material gendered and sexual body in technologies today).

*Using more sophisticated forms of feminist analysis however reveals that technological embodiment of mediation is not limited to the abstract 'social' aspects of 'use', but more significantly involves a sense of 'binding-use' in close association with the form, matter and know-how that constitute particular media technologies.*

(Van Loon, 2008: 81)

The algorithm and design through which an SNS is constructed distributes flows of power, and, as Beer (2009) notes, these web cultures are characterised by a technological unconsciousness. Users seem to be unaware that these SNS software templates are constructed within societal discourses and therefore not neutral. Light (2011) argues how design is a *reiteration* of norms, whereby SNSs not only shape representations but also *actively produce subjects*. In relation to gender and sexuality, these subject positions are reiterations of fixed and binary categories but also of intelligible identity constructions on love, sexuality and relationships.

Particularly, Netlog is such an example of how an easy-to-use design template is to some extent *pre-defining* the self-representations of its audiences. An illustration is the Netlog avatar that was discussed in relation to nicknames. The avatar is used as a primary tool for identification within the network and is assembled automatically by the software. Thereby, it not only contains the nickname and profile picture but also the gender of the user. Netlog represents this by a cultural symbol; namely, a blue dot for boys and a pink one for girls. This pre-defined representation shows how choices are made, resulting in a gendered subject position. Moreover, filling in gender is mandatory when interacting in the Netlog network and thus reproduces gender as an indisputable and binary biological fact (Fausto Sterling, 2000). As the software also requires the user to 'complete' the profile and available



software categories, the program seeks to achieve an intelligible representation. Specifically for the self-representations of intimate identities, it demands coherence between gender, what users are looking for (love, a relationship etc.), sexual interest and love status. As we have seen, the representations of the youngsters agree with this (see Table 2).

In particular, software categories will always be a problematic reduction of identity that is today unacknowledged. These 'normal' and 'evident' categories are widely used today, and more reflection on different domains and subject positions is certainly needed. Although software categories are particularly problematic, the more multifaceted representational tools such as pictures, texts and nicknames are not to be neglected here. Despite the fact that they are more 'free' to create, the demanded public acts of posting, sharing, commenting and tagging are constantly stimulated by the software to generate activity on the website, creating exposure for advertisers. Therefore, Terranova (2000) pejoratively defines the users of the digital economy as 'Netslaves'. In this view, people who are producing content on social media platforms invest free labour and cultural content for a larger digital economy. In the example of Netlog, this new digital economy is clearly shown in how the SNS exploits its users to become brand ambassadors (cf. *supra*). The active publics create content for brands by having them in their friends list, liking them and being involved in their games.

The next section connects this software design to the identity of the publics that appropriate these tools to interact with a larger network. This will demonstrate that the relation between the user and the software is not always evident but shifts between interacting with the software and appropriating the software in more subversive ways.

## User Appropriation of the Netlog Design

Although I argued that the software *pre-defines* the representations of the publics in SNSs, people have the opportunity to appropriate these for unintended purposes by neglecting certain inventories, parodying them, or hacking the operational structures of the technology and/or software. Schäfer defined these processes as a new 'bastard culture':

*The interactions between users and corporations and the connectivity between markets and media practices are inherently intertwined and constitute something I have brashly dubbed 'bastard culture'.*

(Schäfer, 2011: 4)

Here, I will return to Table 5, which illustrates the importance of user appropriation. The majority (86%) of the youngsters did not define their sexual identity. Thereby, they did not complete the inventory incorporated in the software. The signification here is that, in contrast to gender, which is a mandatory field on Netlog, sexual identity remains vague. Consequently, it could be questioned what



would happen if the gender category were permitted to be left blank. Moreover, particularly masculine identities would be expected to strictly define sexual preference as demanded by the hegemonic masculinity position. More insights are needed if this appropriation reflects a broader change in masculine culture to a more open and inclusive identity (McCormack, 2012; Connell, 2005).

Further, a look at the compound representational tools presented in Table 3 reveals that intimate stories are told in 41% of the intimate texts. The popularity of intimate storytelling in texts shows how more open and free spaces to create content are preferred. Youngsters often did not define sexual identity in the opportunity structures for participation as created by the software template but did so in more own creative ways in texts. Moreover, love status and other demonstrations of taste were represented in texts, rebuking the pre-defined inventories. Other youngsters resisted pre-defined participation structures such as age by indicating they were 100 years old. Examples are numerous, demonstrating the tension in how opportunity structures for participation always need to be understood in relation to user appropriation. The political potential of eroding heteronormative identity positions in software structures is present; individual acts open up the intended purposes of software, redefining its significance. Therefore, SNSs like Netlog simultaneously repress and enable user participation, depending on the context.



## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this working paper, I argued that the everyday life practice of intimate storytelling in youth culture has become increasingly mediated. As this mediated storytelling has become a popular media practice, the goal was to understand the social and cultural organisation of intimate storytelling in the lives of Flemish teenagers on the SNS Netlog. The theoretical section argued for a better understanding of the mediation process, thereby transcending the opportunities/threats binary that is often used to understand youth and digital media today (see Walrave and Heirman, 2012; d'Haenens and Vandoninck, 2012; Livingstone, 2008). In the conclusion, I want to elaborate upon some challenges on how to live an intimate citizenship with media.

### Political Economies: Acknowledging Technologies and the Media Institutions

During intimate storytelling in SNSs, the media institutions that shape the platforms for social interaction are important actors. By identifying the four unique selling propositions of Netlog to its users and advertisers, it became clear how the website's marketing ideas shaped the specific design created for participation. Technology is used here as a vehicle to execute the ideas of how to attract users and advertisers. Moreover, technology limits the possibilities to execute marketing ideas, as possibilities are not unlimited due to economic constraints and affordances (Taylor, 2003). Together with people interacting and participating with these software designs, the ultimate representations are shaped. This idea shows how through the theoretical process of articulation, a complexity is added. While most research on youth and SNSs focuses on identity performances, participation and representation, it neglects the underlying processes of technology and software design and, more importantly, how the website positions and markets itself to a wider public. The Netlog website *pre-defines* the representations of the youngsters in important ways; as Light (2011) argued, SNSs actively produce subjects. Therefore, it is important that this be acknowledged, not only in academic research but also by the people that interact and participate with the SNSs in everyday life.

### Intimate Storytelling as Everyday Media Practice: Commodities, Performativities and Publicness

As shown in the quantitative content analysis, references to sexuality, relationships, love and eroticism are very much present. However, two important remarks need to be made here. First, according to the *gestalt* principles, complete profiles *an sich* were not analysed but for pragmatic research reasons divided in different semiotic practices. Therefore, the fact that references to intimacy were mostly concentrated on the same profiles was neglected. Second, a considerable proportion of the



youngsters was not interested in telling stories about sexuality, love or relationships. These youngsters represented themselves mostly as 'merely' social beings, having fun with friends. However, considering this, intimacy is increasingly mediated. Intimate stories are not only continuously told in these networked and public environments but also further *retold* or *reproduced* by others and again repeatedly consumed by even more people.

Observing the *intimate battles* in texts, how sexual identities become *demonstrations of taste* and how intimacy becomes a reiterated *collective act* are illustrations of intimacy being represented as a commodity in SNSs. Digital culture (specifically SNSs) is creating a stage for these acts. These acts clearly *reproduce* each other; as the original is lost, intimacy becomes truly performative. Despite the lack of a clearly identifiable 'original', the representations of intimacy are socially and culturally organised around the heterosexual matrix. Intelligible identities are constructed seeking coherence between gender, sex and desire. Not much space for non-heterosexual identities was observed within the Netlog sample. Some youngsters clearly defined themselves as having a queer identity, but this was limited to text. Visual representations of same-sex intimacy were not found, which is in strong contrast with heterosexual representations of intimate behaviour. This self-surveillance is what Sender (2012) considers a direct consequence of 'the history of queer shame', a history that, notwithstanding the increased reflexivity and opportunity structures to participate in (new) media, is not easy to let go. As Sender remarks:

*We could see the self-production that GLBT people do in contemporary media as a particular form of immaterial labor: emotional labor. This labor includes expressing transformations of feeling from shame to pride through coming out narratives, managing their own emotions and relationships in their roles of queer ambassadors, and training others to be more emotionally accepting of GLBT people.*

(Sender, 2012: 221)

In the Netlog sample, clear illustrations of queer pride were found. Being gay was represented as a commodity next to other 'likes'. In nicknames, one girl referred to her lesbian identity and thereby brought 'being' queer to the forefront as a primary marker of identification within the Netlog network (Munt et al., 2002; Mainsah, 2011). However, the largely heterosexual majority of images, content, identities, relationships and so on present in the observed network shows that the non-normative, subversive acts must not be understood as automatically performed without any cost. SNSs are highly surveyable environments. Further, non-heterosexual identities were also plainly disliked, as observed in one profile. These constraints clearly show the limits of a truly reflexive intimate youth culture in digital media environments (Sender, 2012).



## Social Considerations

The continuous performance of intimacy in the Netlog network reflects the late modern complexity between redefining exclusive heteronormative identities and maintaining strict borders within a normative intimacy. As SNSs are widely used, a primary concern should be creating maximally inclusive spaces for intimate identities to thrive, rebuking any form of exclusion. I proposed the notion of intimate citizenship as an important concept to define this project (Plummer, 2003). Consequently, further research that aims to contribute to how to live an intimate citizenship *with* media becomes increasingly important.



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