

Youth and Intimate Media Cultures: Gender, Sexuality, Relationships, and Desire as Storytelling Practices in Social Networking Sites

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how young people give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships, and desire in the popular social networking site (SNS) Netlog. In arguing how SNSs are important spaces for intimate politics, the extent to which Netlog is a space that allows contestations of intimate stories and a voicing of difference is questioned. These intimate stories should be understood as self-representational media practices; young people make sense of their intimate stories in SNSs through media cultures. Media cultures reflect how audiences and SNS institutions make sense of intimacy. This paper concludes that intimate stories as media practices in the SNS Netlog are structured around creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, bricolage and intertextuality. The intimate storytelling practices focusing on creativity, anonymity, bricolage and intertextuality are particularly significant for a diversity of intimacies to proliferate.

Introduction

Relying on tendencies of late modernity, such as the transformation of intimacy (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992), sociologists of sexuality have documented how our personal intimate lives have become increasingly intertwined with the public arena (Plummer, 2003; Weeks, 1998). Ken Plummer (*ibid.*) talks about increasing “intimate troubles,” which give rise to new ethical dilemmas. Ethnographic research on young people’s digital media use in relation to intimacy argues how these forms of online self-expression “are characterized by more casual and personal forms of public communication” (Ito et al., 2010, p. 147). Our study is based on the conclusion that the boundaries between private and public

intimacy are blurred; “teens are part of a significant shift in how intimate communication and relationships are structured, expressed, and publicized” (Ibid.). As young people have the opportunities to self-represent their intimacies to possibly large audiences who can only be imagined (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011), new emerging rights and responsibilities come to the forefront in making decisions about controlling and accessing such intimate self-representations, but also making choices about how to give shape to eroticisms, sexual and gender identities in these specific mediated places (Plummer, 1995, p. 151). Such complexities have become prominent in the everyday lives of young teenagers, often leading to societal moral panics related to sexuality and technology (Thiel-Stern, 2009). This paper focuses on intimate storytelling as a media practice (Couldry, 2004). Intimate storytelling refers here to a concrete human action in which social media are used to create self-representations that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships, and desires.

Our central argument revolves around the observation that social media are spaces for an intense intimate politics to proliferate in the everyday lives of young people. Exposing the complexity behind the reflexivity of intimate storytelling demands an attention for the structures and normative frameworks regulating intimacy in everyday life, such as heteronormativity (Butler, 1990; Chambers & Carver, 2008; Santore, 2011). Further, and maybe more importantly, attention is needed for the intimate stories that are kept silent. Drawing on critical social constructionist, feminist and queer criticisms on gender, sexuality, and desire, we will first discuss how many of the current studies on young people’s self-representations on SNSs are situated in the incorporation/resistance paradigm; seeing young people as producing intimacies in SNSs as incorporated by dominant ideologies, or rather resisting them (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Although these insights are of primary importance, current research does not inquire into how the mediated and mediatized (Hepp, 2012) online context of SNSs structures intimate stories. Moreover, it does not answer the

question of how this relates to the potential (or not) of SNSs to be democratic and diverse spaces for telling intimate stories. In this paper, we will contextualize intimate stories as media productions (Hasinoff, 2013), investigating the process and politics of transforming intimacy into symbolic content; a process in which audiences and media institutions are important actors (De Ridder, 2013; Silverstone, 2002). We will argue how intimate storytelling practices are shaped through making sense of *media cultures*, defined by Nick Couldry as “collections of sense-making practices whose main resources of meaning are media” (Couldry, 2012, p. 160). This paper relies on a thematic analysis in tandem with a grounded theoretical approach (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to young people’s intimate stories found on profile pages (N200) produced on the SNS Netlog. We argue how the intimate stories, as media practices, in our study were structured around negotiations of creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, bricolage and intertextuality.

Coming to Terms with Gender, Sexuality, Relationships and Desire in Social Media

During the last decade, an extensive amount of scholarship has been produced around how people use SNSs. According to Sonia Livingstone, “it seems that the academy has kept pace with market innovation and social practice” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 395). In particular, the social and cultural organization of gender, sexuality, and desire have received much attention focused on SNSs as spaces for identity construction and performance (boyd, 2007; Buckingham, 2007; Livingstone, 2008) and as a form of a public display of sociality (Baym & boyd, 2012; Ellison & boyd, 2013). As technological media of communication between young people, SNSs are understood as spaces offering democratic opportunities for participation. Young people can create alternatives to mass media produced content and “regimes of representation” (Hall, 1997); however, certain risks and increased complexities exist. Understanding how SNS technologies shape young people’s performances and

socialities, the concept of *affordances* is used to argue how technology frames people's uses, but does not completely determine it (Hutchby, 2001; Schäfer, 2011). Livingstone concludes that the analysis of what people are doing in social media "should acknowledge young people's experiences, and it should situate their social networking practices within an account of the changing conditions of childhood and youth" (Livingstone, 2008, p. 396).

Arguments specifically related to young people's performances of gender, sexuality, and desire are situated around processes of subjectivity, representation, participation, and technology, and the different conclusions often conflict (Dobson, 2012, p. 373). Most inquiries show how specifically young girls, and to a lesser extent boys (Manago, 2013; Siibak, 2010), are subjected to the wider sexualization of (popular) culture (Attwood, 2009). The practice of performing gender, sexuality, and desire in social media is understood as a form of self-objectification (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Gill, 2007). Reframing social media as "technologies of sexiness" (Evans, Riley, & Shankar, 2010), in which being "sexy" is the norm (Ringrose, 2011a), the research concludes that the performances in social media are largely built around the stereotypical, heterosexualized, and commoditized norms that young people (mostly girls) have internalized (Ringrose, 2011b; Sveningsson, 2009). In contrast, some see how SNSs are platforms for performative transgressions of heteronormativity (van Doorn, 2009); whereas others find evidence for subversions, but also continuations and reinforcements of heteronormativity at the same time (Gómez, 2011). Looking at the subjectivities that young people are producing in their SNSs profiles as representations, draws a complex and chaotic picture that oscillates between a strong resilience on essentialist, heteronormative identity constructions and an increased agency that can subvert gender, sexuality, and desire, as they are usually played out in popular mainstream media and everyday life. Moreover, research drawing on the concept of *participation* complicates the picture even more, as it celebrates the increased opportunity

structures of participation. For example, Anita Harris (2008) argues the conventional citizen positions of young women are empowered in online cultures. In addition, marginalized youth are often seen as appropriating technology as a form of democratic participation; such as framing “coming video’s” of LGBTsⁱ as “rhetorical action” (Alexander & Losh, 2010).

Notwithstanding, all of these studies offer valuable insights on how young people live their intimacies in online life worlds; these studies fail to understand how these media become powerful in young people’s self-representations of gender, sexuality, relationships and desires. The insights discussed previously are continuations of what has been understood as the incorporation/resistance paradigm in audience research (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Longhurst, 2007). Relying on Marxist models of the distribution of power, that paradigm questions “whether audience members are incorporated into the dominant ideology by their participation in media activity or whether, to the contrary, they are resistant to that incorporation” (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 15). Much of the research on young people’s intimacies in social media understands that these intimate practices are either constrained by textual representations, such as those from popular culture, or, are resisting them. Amy Adele Hasinoff (2013) has recently argued for a stronger media theory that rethinks social media and sexuality as a form of media production and authorship to deal with complex and heavily laden debates, such as the practice of “sexting” (see Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013). Indeed, when coming to terms with gender, sexuality, and desire in social media, we argue that two things are necessary to push insights forward: first, a clearer understanding of the role of technology and the connected affordances, and, second, a clearer ontological and epistemological account of what it means to live intimacy with social media. In sum, we argue for rethinking intimacy as a form of media practice (Couldry, 2004).

Although the technology is deemed important in most of the research; researchers tend to focus solely on technological structures, such as the “networked nature” (Papacharissi,

2011). Whereas technological structures and the material conditions should be seen as the basics of the mediation process (Van Loon, 2008), technologies are also discursive and should be situated culturally (Carpentier, 2011; Morley, 2007). Even more so, how technological processes become powerful through media institutions creating particular software designs and platforms is often ignored. Therefore, it is necessary to understand both how SNSs are made and how they become meaningful to the audiences using them. Second, to understand what it means “to live intimacy with social media,” a well-defined practice of what people are doing with media is essential. The social practice of producing media in SNSs could be understood as a particular performance in which we *represent* ourselves and our connections of “friends.” This practice should not be equaled to a performance or presentation of self. Self-representation is different as it involves “the mediation of textual object” (Thumim, 2012, p. 6). Most research on SNSs is rather unclear about this. Entertaining an audience are therefore essential features of this audience practice (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Further, self-representation involves understanding the specific politics and symbolic powers of mediation processes. Moreover, the mediation institutions are important actors to consider. The way intimacy in social media is the mediation of a textual object is not well developed in most of the research on people’s online life worlds drawing on gender, sexuality, and desire. Although an interactionist theory of performance and self-presentation offers important insights (Goffman, 1959), it does not say anything about the technological context of mediation in which intimacy is lived in everyday life through using social media websites. Moreover, it is insufficient to understand how the wider process of mediatization (Hepp, 2012) has transformed the practice of intimate storytelling to a truly media-related practice.

Intimate Storytelling as a Media Practice: Media Culture as Context

Going beyond the incorporation/resistance paradigm in which gender, sexuality, and desire in digital media such as SNSs is often understood, we argue that media culture should be taken as the primary context to understand the politics of intimacy in social media. Mediation is in its very essence a transformative process from lived reality into symbolic content in which media institutions and audiences are the primary actors (De Ridder, 2013); the power of SNSs in the shaping of intimacy is in how these mediating actors become meaningful in relation to the practice of intimate storytelling. This process has been conceptualized as the mediatization of culture and society (Hepp, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to understand how young audiences make sense of online sociality in SNSs as part of their everyday lives, but also, how SNSs, as media institutions, attach meaning to (intimate) socialities. Therefore, young people's intimate stories as self-representations should be understood and contextualized within these wider processes of meaning making. In what follows, we will elaborate on how audiences make sense of SNSs in their everyday lives, and also how SNS institutions make sense of intimate socialities when creating platforms for communicative interaction.

Young audiences making sense of SNSs in their everyday (intimate) lives

In the early days of the Internet, self-representations of gender, sexuality, relationships and desire were thought of as being in continuous fluid (re)construction (Baym, 2010), which was eroding normative and rigid organizations of intimate identities (Harrison, 2010). These more utopian perspectives gave rise to dystopian answers, which argue that norms were not reinvented (and sometimes even reinforced) online. Consequently, this greatly influenced the incorporation/resistance paradigm in which much research on young people's intimacies in SNSs situates itself today. However, recent audience research drawing on the role of digital communications media in the everyday (intimate) lives of young people has contributed significantly to our understandings beyond these oppositions (Pascoe, 2011).

In an investigation of how teens live and learn with new media in various settings, C. J. Pascoe argues “romance practices are central to teens’ social world, culture, and use of new media.” Using digital media is seen as rendering intimate practices “simultaneously more public and more private” (Ito et al., 2010, p. 145). As research shows, young people seem to consider these online spaces as important for their performances of intimacy, and thus are continuously balancing the public and private status of what they are sharing and publicizing. For example, intimate relationships and their maintenance are important to make public, while it is also known that in these media environments, talk about intimacies is more explicit (Ibid.). Young social media audiences claim that these intimate stories are “markers of social success and popularity, as they elicit compliments and result in a higher tally of friends” (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013, p. 108). Therefore SNSs are a “commoditized environment” based on the logics of a “celebritized popular culture” (Ibid.). Indeed, not all self-representation should therefore be understood as a personal and meaningful self-disclosure (Livingstone, 2008; Thumim, 2012); young audiences argue that they aim to portray themselves in a positive light (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013). Consequently, intimate storytelling as a self-representational media practice is about performing, and entertaining, in which creativity, aesthetics, and popular culture are important.

Contradictory to audiences making sense of self-representation as a creative public exposure in which popularity is significant; privacy, authenticity, coherence, and realness are recognized as very important at the same time. Although young people recognize anonymity as facilitative to “expressing themselves openly” (Awan & Gauntlett, 2013), they emphasize how self-representations should be as closely connected as possible with who you are “in real life” (Van Cleemput, 2008). Often, pictures are important media tools to judge whether people “are authentic or not” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 403). Pictures are understood as signaling “the real me” and an embodied coherent identity (Mallan, 2009). The conflictuality between

expressing the self through performing/entertaining and promoting a real/authentic/coherent self is how young audiences currently understand self-representation in SNSs. Consequently, these ideas may become powerful in shaping intimate storytelling practices. Further, these ideologies for making sense of self-representation are not only played out at the level of the audience, but are also inextricably intertwined with how SNS institutions make sense of (intimate) socialities.

SNSs institutions making sense of (intimate) socialities

Internet applications have a history if we look at how they have offered people ways to represent themselves in stages, from anonymous homepages and databases to current complex platforms for interaction that steer users in invisible ways by collecting (meta)data, using complex algorithms. (van Dijck, 2013a). Software platforms of SNSs are built around market and cultural powers that structure peoples activities, self-representations, and ideas on online sociality (De Ridder, 2013). SNSs have become an integral part of our media cultures, and they contribute to the sense making of the intimate storytelling practices in everyday life; this observation is much more complex than defining affordances around pure technological networked structures. Recently, José Van Dijck (2013a) argued how social media have transformed into institutions, “monetizing connectivity” by gathering data about their users, whereas social media used to be designed around interactive communities facilitating connectedness between people. Moreover, users have adapted to this changing logic by turning self-expression into continuous self-promotion, narrative, and storytelling: “Following the examples of celebrities’ self-promotion, many users (especially young adults and teenagers) shape their online identities in order to gain popularity and hopefully reach a comfortable level of recognition and connectedness” (van Dijck, 2013b, p. 203).

As a consequence of structuring self-representational practices of users around the culture of connectivity, scholars have criticized SNSs as narrow tools for performing

identities and intimacies. Self-promotion demands identity management, fixing a fragmented self (van Zoonen, 2013). Representing identity as a narrative is often based on normative demands for coherence, intelligibility, and recognition (Cover, 2012). Drawing on the work of Judith Butler (1990) on performativity and citationality, feminist and queer critics argue how self-representations are shaped into narrow subjectivities (Van House, 2011). Social media are promoting the ideology of having one transparent self and identity (van Dijck, 2013b).

Intimate stories as media practices are shaped by media culture: how audiences and institutions make sense of self-representation. Conflictualities between market powers of SNSs, cultural powers, and audiences' tactics give rise to a complex structuring of intimate stories and the mediatization of intimacy in the everyday lives of young people. Important to consider is how do these media cultures and the structuring of intimate stories relate to democratic voicing possibilities and diversity in social media? In addition, how do they connect to the social and cultural organization of sexuality, gender, relationships, and desire? In the empirical section, we will structure our analyses of young people's intimate stories on the SNS Netlog, and how these self-representations are situated around creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, bricolage and intertextuality.

Method

The intimate stories of young people we have investigated have to be contextualized within the region of Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. We analyzed the intimate stories on the SNS Netlog (www.netlog.be), because it appeared to be the most popular among teenagers when we started the research in November 2010; 74 percent of Flemish teens had an account on Netlog.ⁱⁱ

Data collection

To collect the data, one of the authors created a profile on the SNS Netlog. In November 2010, schools and youth movements were contacted, and we invited youngsters to “friend” the research page on Netlog. The position of the researcher was not invisible, but it was made explicit when asking youngsters to join the research page on Netlog. This was also repeated on the profile itself.ⁱⁱⁱ Recruiting youngsters in their offline life worlds provided them with maximum control over their participation in this study; they had to actively negotiate and add the research profile. This research praxis was not only a choice of empirical rigor but also mostly one of Internet-research ethics. Reflecting over the researcher-participant relationships when doing research with young people on SNSs, Brady Robards (Robards, 2013) argues for a continuous reflexive research position, as SNSs blur the public/private dichotomy. Important is that we did not focus on young people’s intimacies while treating these websites as simple “information repositories.” Rather, the specific mediated context in which these stories were situated is the primary object of our study. Further, we adapted the nicknames in this study to avoid any reference to the original persons.

Data analysis

For this study, we captured the data of 200 profiles of youngsters between 13 and 18 years of age, focusing on nicknames, self-introductory texts, and pictures. Although we had a wider variety of data available, we chose to proceed with this specific data to focus in-depth on those self-representational stories that give meaning to gender, sexuality, relationships, and desire.^{iv} The process of interpreting the meanings in these texts and images was based on a thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012), combined with a critical grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Within these nicknames, self-introductory texts, pictures, and themes were exposed inductively. Further, we contextualized these themes with critical sensitizing concepts organized around the concept of heteronormativity (Goltz, 2009). Therefore, we looked at how discursive constructions evolved around binary identity

categories (e.g., male/female, masculine/feminine, straight/gay, single/in a relationship), but we also explored stereotyping and resistant practices to heteronormativity. Moreover, we related the themes to their mediated and mediatized contexts, such as exploring the use of popular music lyrics, texts of movie quotes, identifying themes, and so on.

Intimate Storytelling in the Social Networking Site Netlog

The SNS Netlog has particular market strategies (De Ridder, 2013). Most importantly, the website is targeted specifically at a younger age group (14–24), and it is built around getting to know new people, instead of only maintaining a network of friends; they emphasize community building rather than being structured only into a closed network. Therefore, the website is more “fun” and “entertaining” than authentic and real-name designs, such as Facebook. Netlog allows users to choose anonymous nicknames and, moreover, the website offers more creative features, such as choosing the color palette of your profile. Netlog’s communication tools are personal self-representation features (pictures with rating functions, videos, a blog, self-introductory texts, general profile layout, personal events calendar, etc.), tools for interpersonal communication (sending personal messages) and communication with the larger connected network (comments on pictures and videos, a guestbook, etc.). Further in this section, we structured the results around the mediated and mediatized context of telling intimate stories in Netlog, which are creativity, anonymity, authenticity, performativity, bricolage and intertextuality.

Creativity

Self-introductory texts seemed to be the most important space on Netlog to tell intimate stories; this was often a carefully produced creative practice. Those texts were often written using a lot of emoticons (graphical representations, such as hearts) and a mixing of languages, such as Dutch, English, and French. Intimate stories seemed to be about the personal as well as the interpersonal. To produce intimate identities from a personal

perspective, youngsters mostly wrote about love and sexual identities. A small number of both boys and girls made references to sexual and erotic pleasures, writing about experiences in suggestive ways. Interestingly, youngsters preferred to use the free spaces of textual self-introductions to make their sexual identities clear, rather than using the predefined software inventories:

*Love Status: Single Ladie'sZz** (:p)*

(Boy, 17).^v

Making a sexual preference in self-introductory texts clear in a rather explicit way is a practice we observed by heterosexual boys, which fits within how a hegemonic masculinity is maintained through the production of a clearly defined heterosexual identity (Connell, 2005). In addition, young people identifying themselves as gay or lesbian used self-introductory texts to make sexual identities quite clear. Interestingly, using these free textual spaces to introduce sexual identity illustrates how not much emphasis is put on “being gay”; it is just part—among other things—of everyday life:

Anna.

.17.

.Piercing: 2 Dermals.

Gay.

. Saxophone.

(Girl, 17)

Girls' stories were not so much about making a sexual identity clear,^{vi} but rather emphasized their creativity (citing poems, lyrics, etc.) to compose texts that represented them as loving, emotional, but also empowered, as shown in the example, being strong and able to cope with a lost love:

If a give up, this does not mean I am weak, but that I am strong enough to let go.

(Girl, 16)

Stories that focused more on the interpersonal connected the self to others by telling stories about loved ones. For the most part, this was done through telling about shared memories in long and extended texts, whereas the others briefly communicated about their relationship status, accompanied by emoticons such as hearts. In this way, the Netlog page was used to institutionalize relationships, making them public to the audience (Ito, et al., 2010), often accompanied by the date both lovers got together. On a considerable number of profiles, these texts were written by the person to whom the story was connected with. The youngsters called this specific practice “breaking in.” Breaking in is an intimate practice that goes beyond the text, as it is an illustration of sharing each other’s passwords that are needed to login to the Netlog profile. The following illustration was written by the boyfriend of a fourteen-year-old girl:

*Hi darling, I'm going to start with breaking in and all this tralala. . . . Because everyone is doing 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!!) [. . .].*

(Girl, 14)

The way the cited text addresses the audiences, makes clear how intimate stories on Netlog are carefully produced while thinking of all those who will read it. Intimate stories in self-introductory texts seem to continuously transgress the very personal and intimate to the public; moreover, the stories are produced within masculinity and femininity subjectivities. However, girls particularly show creativity in appropriating a wide range of media practices, creating their own stories, which are often strong, submissive, and lustful at the same time (Kearney, 2006). These forms of creativity show how young girls negotiate objectifying media portrayals. More specific as a media practice, young people appropriated the software designs in creative ways. They developed specific tactics by sharing passwords, which are

normally used to authenticate one unique profile owner. Further, they ignored closed software inventories in the benefit of making their self-expressions of their intimate identities their own.

Anonymity

Facebook, the most popular SNS worldwide, supports an online real-name culture (van Dijck, 2013b). However, anonymity is an important element of online communication. As mentioned before, young people argue that anonymity helps them to express themselves openly. Moreover, anonymity has proven beneficial for people to “connect with communities and romantic partners, find information, and gain confidence”; while educators and media literacy campaigns have refuted anonymity for the online protection of children (Hasinoff, 2013, p. 7). Netlog’s specific affordances allow users to use anonymous nicknames as self-representations. In the Netlog community, nicknames are important, as they function as primary markers of identification to navigate through the website. Consequently, nicknames could be seen as the most important signals of identity (Baym, 2010, p. 109). An important number of nicknames reflect personal identities; thereby, the forename was used and adapted to make it a “unique” signaling of identity. Next to using the nickname as a personal signaling of identity, social identities were also used to identify the self with other groups, such as gendered identities, ethnicity, and sexual identities. We argue that the creative process of using anonymous nicknames opened up Netlog as a place for a more reflexive play with difference and power. Gendered identities referenced in the nickname reflect conventional male and female gender characteristics, such as fashion (*fashionshiousxXxEllen*) and football (*jordi_voetballer*), whereas ethnic identities, such as *MAGREBB_united*, communicated a sense of belonging. Further, one girl identified herself as a lesbian in her nickname, using *G_Star_Pot* (In Dutch, *Pot* is a slang word for *lesbian* corresponding with *dyke*.). The use of social identities in nicknames reflects the importance of identity politics that young people

use to make strategic identity claims whereby they become clearly recognizable within a majority that is heterosexual and white. The use of identity politics shows how teenagers have knowledge on the dynamics of “othering” (Mainsah, 2011). A number of youngsters specifically referred to intimate desires by presenting themselves in a nickname as attractive, sexy, and loving. Further, relationships were also made public, using nicknames that connected the self to a lover by using both lovers’ names (e.g., *EliineAndSplentr*). As nicknames are the primary markers of identification in the online space of Netlog, the status of intimate stories is immediately made clear; they are very much present and an important way of representing the self to others. More so than using “real names,” anonymous nicknames offered more complex negotiations for identification.

Authenticity

While anonymity opened up a more reflexive play of difference and power, pictures as self-representations are known to authenticate people’s online profiles. Pictures are important forms of storytelling (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2011) that centralize the importance of embodiment in relation to intimate storytelling. Although pictures did not seem to be as popular as texts to tell intimate stories, a considerable number of youngsters in the sample produced intimate narratives through photography. Most frequently, pictures showed intimate relationships between a boy and a girl, holding each other and kissing. Further, some girls took pictures representing them as attractive and sexual, showing a fragmented body, and often using close-ups while gazing into the camera. Notably, pictures were produced in creative ways, often adapted to soften the colors, adding symbols such as hearts and making banners with a collection of pictures for the profile. Pictures seemed to be important, as they are supporting the intimate stories found in the self-introductory texts discussed earlier. Thereby, these visual representations reproduced the dominant cultural significations of

femininity, masculinity, and especially heterosexuality. Further, the body seemed to be an important signifier that became materialized (Butler, 1993) through the discourses found in the intimate texts. Particularly, the strong focus on representing heterosexual intimacies is a clear materialization of the textual discourses on intimacy. Being in love, intimacy, and sexuality were repeatedly inscribed on a particular kinds of bodies, carefully produced in the pictures of boys and girls kissing. Materialization is important for the wider intimate politics in Netlog, as it is the very process through which difference and sexual pluralism is threatened. There was an obvious symbolic annihilation of visual representations in pictures of same sex intimacies, this in strong contrast with heterosexual intimacy. Intimate storytelling as a media practice in Netlog can therefore be seen as subjected to the norms circulating in Western media cultures, where gay and lesbian identities are represented according to a “double standard” (Streitmatter, 2009). Although having a gay and lesbian identity is allowed, practicing intimacy through pictures does not seem evident.

Performativity

At the basis of “performativity” are a number of repetitious activities based on norms that are unconsciously reproduced. In social media such as Netlog, performativity is a useful concept to describe the sociotechnical configurations in which intimate storytelling takes place (van Doorn, 2009). In this section, we will argue that the politics of intimacy in Netlog are constructed through the process of reiteration that is linked to Netlog as a commercial media institute, and the media practice of intimate storytelling. First, it is important to acknowledge the market powers and current conditions of popular SNSs as media institutions wanting people to produce stories. They are not spaces where all self-representations are meaningful, but rather where participation and creating content yourself becomes a condition to be allowed in the wider sociability the network offers (Thumim, 2012). In this respect, we noticed how intimate stories are, rather than original stories, citations of each other; intimate

storytelling in Netlog is a collective act continuously re-reproduced. The introduced “breaking in texts” (cf. supra) showed through the example how this specific intimate storytelling practice came into being; “Because everyone does it. . . .” Second, this very process is how intimate storytelling as a social practice becomes normative within the network. Intimate storytelling as a media practice is produced according to a vast set of rules and normative structures to be intelligible.

The following example is a text on the profile of a fifteen-year-old boy, writing to his girlfriend. The text represents how intimate stories in Netlog are constructed through strong emotions:

I would never have thought that I would ever say this, but you make my dreams come true, a lot of people say forever with you, with you I have this feeling. When this would be the case, I would be the most happy boy on earth. I will love you forever and you are who you are, nobody is perfect.

(Boy, 15)

This story concentrates itself on “feeling,” “happiness,” “dreaming,” and “be yourself.” This text is just one example of the many intimate stories that focus on reiterations of emotions that strongly connect to norms and values about intimacy, such as “faithfulness,” “authenticity,” “having a relationship forever,” and “honesty.” Interestingly, the emotions are more than inner feelings and cognitive utterances; the performativity constructs an emotional politics through which subjectivities are produced (Ahmed, 2004). Further, the emotional discursive is also materialized into the bodies represented in the pictures that support these intimate discourses. The mediation of emotions is the use of an intensive emotional discourse connected to values and norms on love and intimacy. However, this very performativity of how intimate stories should be told among young people in Netlog leaves room for transgressions, because of the shift to living emotions with such intensity, not in private but in popular public spaces. The ambiguity of the discourse on love and friendship is one example;

love and friendship become hard to distinguish. The following quotation was written as “breaking in text,” and it represents a friendship between two girls:

Do you know you are the most important person in my live? I do not think anyone knows me better. You taught me to talk about my feelings [. . .].

(Girl, 14)

Although this “queering of friendships” through intimate stories was exclusively a practice of girls, boys also engaged in communicating about strong emotions, thereby redefining hegemonic masculinity. However, an important refinement is how boys’ transgressions are characterized by heterosexual recuperations (McCormack, 2012), which means that they tended to only show emotions within clear heterosexual borders. Boys made use of intimate storytelling almost exclusively in relation to their girlfriends, or when making it clear that they were searching for a girl.

Bricolage and intertextuality

Self-representations are embedded within popular culture. Intimate storytelling as a media practice introduces an intertextual self, a self that appropriates the texts and aesthetics popular culture provides to create a story; popular culture is a significant resource to make sense of self-representations. Bricolage has already been described as a principal component of digital culture (Deuze, 2006). By combining a number of intertextual references to texts from popular culture, intimate stories are examples of a postmodern bricolage; through the rearrangement of different texts and personal stories, new meanings to young people’s intimate identities are introduced. Specifically dominated by the Anglophonic commodity markets, such as the music, film, and celebrity industry, Western popular media cultures played an important role in our Netlog sample. On the profile of a 15-year-old girl, we found two pictures where she represented herself in an attractive and sexy way. While looking at the camera, she poses by touching her hair and pursing her lips. Next to these two pictures, she posted a video clip of the popular R&B singer “Zion,” featuring the rapper “Akon.” The video

shows how a girl walks through a sunny and busy street. Because of her sexy poses and walk, she gets the attention and admiring looks of all the young and old men she passes by. The example characterizes how the media literacy of how to pose in an intimate way is attached to pleasure, to appropriate popular cultural texts as recourses. The girl in our sample clearly copied the moves found in the video clip. Likewise, when looking at the wider sample, the pictures showing intimate relationships between two people were not spontaneous pictures but rather were carefully produced, often taken of the couple in close-up, with suitable perspective chosen, the colors changed to black and white, or their image framed within popular media aesthetics.

Lyrics from popular songs and quotes from movies were also widely used to produce intimate stories. Youngsters appropriated these texts, complementing the text by adding symbols such as hearts; adapting the gender of the artist that sings the song so that the song would fit in their own self-representations; and mixing Dutch sentences with the English lyrics. Songs such as “In Love with You Forever,” by the American Idol finalist Eliot Yamin and “As I Am,” from the well-known teenage star Hannah Montana, are just two meaningful examples. The very values that are communicated within the songs, such as faithfulness and authenticity in these cases agrees with the wider themes we found in the intimate stories that focused so strongly on emotions. However, these quotes and songs are not always clear citations from the “original” but rather are embedded within a specific subcultural practice of telling intimate stories in social media profiles. We found that many of the texts, such as poems and love declarations, came from other websites, and more specific blogs, such as “Engelse zinnen <3” (In Dutch, meaning “I love English sentences”) and “Lovegirls.” Specially used and operated by girls, these community blogs and websites were built around the most beautiful SMS messages from boyfriends, the most romantic quotes, and so on. This commodification of intimacy is in fact a process of “recommodification,” that is how products

of the media cultural industries become appropriated and mixed by teenagers who develop their own style in these blogs, websites, and SNS profiles (Brown, 2007). Bricolage and intertextuality are essential elements in the sense-making practices of young people, to produce intimate stories, but it should not be equated with a resistance to what popular culture provides. However, popular culture offers scripts (that is normative and resistant scripts) to talk about intimacies (Van Damme & Biltreyst, 2012) Acknowledging bricolage and intertextuality as inextricably intertwined with intimate storytelling opens up SNSs as spaces that offer cultural reimaginings for intimacies.

Conclusion: Media Cultures and Intimate Citizenships

In young people's everyday lives, intimacies are intertwined with media; private lives have become public dialogues, giving rise to new intimate troubles and ethical dilemmas. As such, SNSs have become central in reflections about "intimate citizenships"; "a cluster of emerging concerns over the rights to choose what we do with our genders, eroticisms; bodies, feelings, identities and our representations" (Plummer, 1995, p. 151). We could argue that an intimate citizenship has become increasingly connected to young people's media cultures; new rights and responsibilities to tell intimate stories are intertwined with making sense of their genders, sexualities, relationships, and desires through media. Because SNSs are important spaces for an intimate politics to proliferate, we have investigated whether a popular SNS provides a space for democratic and diverse intimate stories. Therefore, our study has been based on young people's intimate stories as self-representational media practices.

Choices about what young people can do with their intimacies in social media are not only limited by the social and cultural organization of intimacy, but also are structured around ideas of how young audiences make sense of SNSs in their everyday lives, and how SNS

institutions define their market and cultural powers by creating software platforms. Netlog as a case study was relevant, as it is opposed to current ideas about online authenticity, fixed identities, and real-name cultures and built around fun, entertainment, popularity, and community building. The Netlog case study showed how anonymity offers more complex negotiations for identity. Being creative and appropriating the software design in particular ways opened up the space for more contestation and creativity around the symbolic production of intimacy. Moreover, using intertextual references to popular culture to create intimate stories offers young people experiences with cultural reimaginations. However, the Netlog space is also structured around performative repetition and a strong materialization of heterosexual intimacy.

The politics of transforming intimacy into symbolic content in social media are complex. Current media cultures related to social media use tend to continuously search for realness and authenticity, whereas our research showed how anonymity, creativity, and bricolage and intertextuality opened up Netlog as a diverse space for contestation. Young people who perform their stories in an entertaining way “may facilitate media critique, creativity, and self-reflection” (Hasinoff, 2013, p. 9). Rather than focusing on intimacy produced in SNSs as presentations of self or self-presentations, the suggestion to rethink young people’s intimacies as self-representational media practices opens up new ways of looking. Moreover, transgressing the incorporation/resistance paradigm for an understanding of how young people’s intimate stories are connected to current media cultures offers insights into the mediatization of intimacy, and how media become powerful and interwoven into the intimate practices of young people. Future research should further explore how audiences and media institutions make sense of intimacy in social media so that we may understand the true possibilities for a democratic and diverse intimate citizenship, to emerge in everyday media spaces.

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ⁱ LGBT's refers to Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgender

ⁱⁱThe data were provided by a research report called "Apestaartjaren," which is published every two years by the Flemish Network for Youth Movements (Jeugddienst en Jeugdnetwerk). The 2010 and 2012 reports can be found at:
<http://www.apestaartjaren.be/node/585>.

ⁱⁱⁱOn the profile page, the researcher was clearly identified. Further, the research was explained as an inquiry into active users of social media between 14 and 18 years of age. It

clearly stated that privacy would be respected, and the researcher's e-mail address was provided if any of the participants had further questions.

^{iv} This research is part of a larger project on youth, heteronormativity, and self-representation in social media. These profiles were collected during an 18-month participatory observation in the SNS Netlog, and they have been saved in an offline database. We refer to a more extensive research report in which we combined quantitative content analysis on these profiles, as well as a descriptive exploration of young people's intimacies (De Ridder, 2012).

^v For practical reasons all texts were translated from Dutch to English. We refer to the gender and age of the profile owner under each quote.

^{vi} As we will discuss further, girls that identified as lesbian are an important exception; they often made their sexual identities very clear in self-introductory texts.