Social Media and Young People’s Sexualities: Values, Norms, and Battlegrounds

# Details

## Year

2017

## DOI

10.1177/2056305117738992

## Issued

2017

## Language

English

## Start Page

## End Page

## Authors

De Ridder S.

## Type

Journal article

## Journal

Social Media + Society

## Publisher

SAGE Publications

## Topics

## Sample

89 young people between 14 and 19 years of age in Dutch-speaking Belgium, 52 girls and 37 boys

# Abstract

This article explores how young people are making sense of sexuality in the context of social media, considering social media’s material as well as symbolic operations. Drawing on 14 focus groups (n=89, conducted in 2012 and 2015) with young people between 14 and 19 years of age in Dutch-speaking Belgium, this article is informed by young people’s discussions, meanings, values, and norms on sexuality and social media, situated in everyday life peer group settings. The results argue
how young people are making strong value judgments about sexuality in the context of social media and how they use a sharp hierarchical system to distinguish between “good” and “bad” sexual practices in social media. Therefore, young people draw on essentialist sexual ideologies. This article discusses these value judgments not only in relation to how social media functions
but also in relation to social media’s symbolic operations, namely how they are meaningful for young people’s sexualities. The role of social media is discussed in relation to broader cultural dynamics of young people’s changing sexual cultures, which are characterized by risk, resistance, individualization, and mediatization. The article concludes how young people’s consistent
need for making value judgments about sexuality in the context of social media may point to a conservatism that is driven by social media’s overwhelming role in culture and society. Social media have become a crucial battleground for sexual politics; they need to be taken seriously as spaces that produce values and norms about sexuality, deciding what kind of sexualities are supported, repressed, or disciplined.

# Outcome

The researcher aimed "to expose knowledge on dominant social and cultural norms; what young people think is socially desirable to say about social media and sexuality. Being too sexy, too slutty, too anonymous, too nude, or too gay were common evaluations of peers’ self-representations and many other practices in social media. Such “stupid” self-representations were read by participants as simply demanding attention or being “unnatural,” “unreal,” or “inauthentic.”
The consistent value judgments throughout the different focus groups may be pointing to a new sexual conservatism in young people’s knowledge on managing “good” sexual values and norms. This conservatism is a way of dealing with the complexities of perceived and real online risks in a rapidly, continuously transforming social media ecology.
Despite having the best intentions to guide young people online, society has introduced a rigorous regime of control that is not based on sexual agency, nor ethics and are telling them how to behave online, what it means to have an online reputation, and so on. We should be aware that many of the discourses participants reproduced echoed society’s moral panics." (De Ridder, 2017, pp. 6-8)