



<http://www.diva-portal.org>

This is the published version of a paper published in *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Sundén, J., Paasonen, S., Tiidenberg, K., Vihlman, M. (2024)

Locating sex: regional geographies of sexual social media

Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography, 31(4): 424-440

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2022.2122410>

Access to the published version may require subscription.





N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-49944>

Locating sex: regional geographies of sexual social media

Jenny Sundén^a , Susanna Paasonen^b , Katrin Tiidenberg^c  and Maria Vihlman^d 

^aDepartment of Gender Studies, Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Media Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; ^cThe Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia; ^dDepartment of Gender Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

Contributing to the field of the geographies of digital sexualities, this article explores the geosocial dimensions of digital sexual cultures by analyzing three regionally operating, linguistically specific social media platforms devoted to sexual expression. Drawing on case studies of an Estonian platform used primarily for group sex, a Swedish platform for kink and BDSM, and a Finnish platform for nude self-expression, we ask how these contribute to and shape sexual geographies in digital and physical registers. First, we focus on the platforms as tools for digital wayfinding and hooking up. Second, we consider how the platforms help to reimagine and sexualize physical locations as ones of play, and how this transforms the ways of inhabiting such spaces. Third, we analyze how the platforms operate as sexual places in their own right, designed to accommodate certain forms of display, relating, and belonging. We argue, in particular, that these platforms shape how users imagine and engage with location by negotiating notions of proximity and distance, risk and safety, making space for sexual sociability. We approach geographies of sexuality both through the regional and linguistic boundaries within which these platforms operate, as well as through our participants' sense of comfort and investment in local spaces of sexual play. As sexual content is increasingly pushed out of large, U.S.-owned social media platforms, we argue that locally operating platforms provide a critical counterpoint, allowing for a vital re-platforming of sex on a regional level.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 October 2021
Accepted 4 July 2022

KEYWORDS

Geographies of digital sexuality; nudity and kink; proximity and distance; regional social media; risk and safety; sexual social media

CONTACT Jenny Sundén  jenny.sunden@sh.se  Department of Gender Studies, Södertörn University, Huddinge, SE-141 89, Sweden.

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Introduction

Online platforms are designed with certain uses in mind and therefore condition and structure the forms that sociability can take on them. Given the degrees to which ubiquitous connectivity and extensive uses of geolocation services have blurred the distinction between online and offline sites that was once key to Internet inquiry, platforms also extensively map onto, play with and help to re-signify physical spaces. Contributing to the field of the geographies of digital sexualities (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2019), this article explores the geosocial dimensions of digital sexual cultures by analyzing three regionally operating and linguistically specific social media platforms (Alaston Suomi, Darkside and Libertine Center) devoted to sexual expression.

Starting with a contextualization of the shifting spaces for online sexuality, this article moves to examining these three platforms as sites for locating sex and sexual play. First, we focus on the means of digital wayfinding, connecting sexually to others and hooking up. Second, we consider how the platforms help to reimagine and sexualize physical locations as ones of play, and how this transforms the ways of moving through and inhabiting such spaces. Third, and finally, we discuss how the platforms operate as sexual places in their own right, designed to accommodate certain forms of display, relating, and belonging. Throughout, we ask how these platforms—designed to afford certain uses and not others—can make people re-encounter everyday spaces by not merely creating new forms of sociability, but by transforming ways of relating to, and understanding them. We argue, in particular, that these platforms shape how users imagine and engage with location and locatedness by negotiating notions of proximity and distance, risk and safety in ways that challenge binary understandings of both space and sex. We approach geographies of sexualities through the regional and linguistic boundaries within which these platforms operate, through our participants' articulations of a sense of comfort and investment in local spaces of sexual play, and by accounting for how platform affordances co-produce the sexualization of spaces, and the spatialization of sex (cf. Race 2015a).

Shifting spaces of online sexuality

Digital media and their entanglement with sexual identities and communities involve a spatial dimension by default. During the heyday of 1990s cybercultures, mailing lists, electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups, chatrooms, and text-based virtual worlds housed lesbian communities (Correll 1995; Wakeford 1996), gay male erotic spaces (Campbell 2001), and BDSM practices (Rambukkana 2007). These provided venues potentially freed from geographical constraints, even as such presumed 'placelessness' proved time and again

to be an illusion: one of the most common questions was 'where are you?' which anchored these anonymous and pseudonymous digital spaces in specific geographic locations, bodies, and imaginaries (Sundén 2003, 91). Such sexual spaces predated more fluid and mobile forms of digital connectivity, even as the sexual imaginaries that took shape on them were catalysts for physical encounters (Campbell 2004), affording the pleasure of knowing where the other was located.

With the expansion of social media in the 2000s, online sociability has become more and more centralized on select platforms originating from the Silicon Valley. The development of increasingly corporate platforms and progressively more powerful devices, apps, and networks, digital intimacies have proliferated (Andreassen et al. 2018; Dobson, Robards, and Carah 2018; Paasonen 2017; Sundén 2018; Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020). Networked digital media are more than conduits of desire: they are intrinsically entwined with people's sexual attachments and connections, shaping how desire takes form and becomes oriented. How we use and make sense of platforms contributes to how we relate to ourselves and others sexually, what we consider sexy, and how we communicate, experiment with, or experience sex in ways that have everything to do with the making of sites of sexual significance (see Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020).

The spatial properties of the entwinement of sexuality and digital technologies have become particularly evident with mobile and locative media. For researchers situated at the intersection of sex, networked media, and space, dating and hookup apps are obvious objects of study. This field has traced the practices of men who have sex with men through location-based apps like Grindr (e.g., Bonner-Thompson 2017; Miles 2017; Mowlabocus 2016; Race 2015b), while also expanding to the affordances of apps like Tinder primarily aimed at straight users (e.g., David and Cambre 2016; Duguay 2017). Hookup apps are per definition geosocial, building on the swiftness of the swipe and the geographical proximity between bodies in ways that reconfigure spaces and locations, especially for queer, sexual, and gender non-conforming communities.

Generic social media, however, has grown drastically less welcoming of sexual expression. In the wake of the 2018 U.S. FOSTA-SESTA bills targeting sex trafficking that rendered social media platforms liable for the content published by their users, content moderation policies pertaining to sexual content have notably tightened (cf. Pilipets and Paasonen 2022; Paasonen and Sundén forthcoming). Motivated in opaque ways as actions for increased user safety, the turning of social media platforms into nudity and sexuality-free zones operating with real-name policies (as opposed to pseudonyms) speaks volumes about moral concerns and cultural contexts key to their economy (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel 2020, 46–47).

Efforts to push sex out from public view are particularly harmful for communities on sexual margins who rely on digital networks and platforms

for self-expression and belonging (Byron 2019; Cho 2018). This loss of ground—which Stephen Mollidrem (2019) refers to as the de-platforming of sex—involves a dismissal of queer and kink communities from corporate social media platforms, but also a dismissal of the value of sex and sexual expression more broadly in people’s lives. While platforms for sexual sociability certainly exist, with hookup apps thriving and FetLife (a Canadian-born transnational social networking site for kinksters with millions of users) alone having been in operation since 2008, we argue that locally operating web platforms provide a critical counterpoint to the content policies of U.S.-based social media services, allowing for a re-platforming of sex on a regional level. Analyses of local platforms help to steer discussions away from platform determinism (Solomon 2021), contribute granularity to debates on sexual rights, and, importantly, add nuance to how geosocial dimensions of digital sexual cultures are made sense of.

Data and methods

Drawing on case studies of an Estonian platform used primarily for group sex (Libertine Center), a Swedish platform for kink and BDSM communities (Darkside) and a Finnish platform for nude self-expression (Alaston Suomi), we ask how these contribute to and are shaped by sexual geographies in both digital and physical registers (for an early version of this work, see Sundén et al. 2021). Our data consists of platform walkthroughs (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018), a year of participant observation on each platform, in-depth interviews with administrators/developers of two of the platforms ($n=4$) and in-depth interviews with the users of all three ($n=56$). Interviews were conducted online (Zoom, Skype, etc.) at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, and were either audio-video or audio based on the interviewee’s preferences. Interviews lasted 1,5–2 hours and were transcribed in original language, then open coded in Nvivo. Analytical memos in English were shared among the authors followed by a subsequent round of thematic coding across broad themes that emerged from open coding (articulations of e.g., ‘good sex,’ sexual culture, national identity, platform norms, affordances, space and location, privacy and publicness).

We analysed the interviews in the contexts of knowledge generated via walkthroughs (and captured as shared notes, memos, and screen-grabs) and in the context of the cultural immersion generated through observation (captured as field-notes). Our analysis was iterative (Tracy 2013, p. 184): we started from a categorized collection of interview snippets and gradually, by moving back and forth between the data and the emerging connections and progressively refining patterns, we arrived at the cross-platform exploration of the geosocial dimensions of digital sexual cultures and the practices of digital wayfinding, reimagining and sexualizing locations, and platforms

as sexual places that structure this article. All participants gave their informed consent for their experiences to be included in this analysis. The data was collected, handled, and stored in accordance with the ethics clearance granted by each of the participating institutions' ethics review boards prior to the beginning of fieldwork.

Our three platforms share some similarities but are also clearly distinct in their concepts, functions, and regional contexts. Libertine Center (LC) is an Estonian 'social media network for open-minded adults,' which was founded in 2018 and currently has about 50,000 users (population of Estonia is 1,3 million), of whom 70% are from Estonia. Estonian users, in turn, concentrate in the capital and other larger urban areas. 'Open-minded' is a direct translation of the Estonian word 'vabameelne,' which dictionaries in turn translate as 'liberal,' or 'free spirited' with regards to people's sexual and moral proclivities. Adults interested in a variety of sexual lifestyles and practices are welcome and present on the platform, but 'Swinger' (a category only available to those who sign up for a couple's account) is currently the most popular, followed by 'Libertine' (available to single and couple users). Thus, users interested in variations of partner swapping and group sex are the dominant group on LC. The interface is in English, but the predominant language of interaction is Estonian, although posts and messages in English are also common.

Darkside was founded already in 2003 and is the largest Swedish kink and BDSM web community with some 250,000 members (Sweden having a population of 10,2 million), housing social and sexual networking. In stark contrast to large corporate social media platforms, Darkside is virtually non-profit and as such offering an alternative platform for non-normative sexualities by providing, as the site states, 'love and community in BDSM, kink, sex positivity, fetishism, expressions and lifestyles beyond the prison of normativity,' firmly set within an ethos of consent and mutual respect. Even if the site is functional in English and other Nordic languages (due to community translation efforts), it is built on and in Swedish, and according to site statistics, it is primarily used by people residing in Sweden (predominantly in Stockholm and other urban areas).

Launched in 2007, Alaston Suomi (i.e. 'Naked Finland') is an online image gallery originally created as an adult version of IRC Galleria—a local pre-Facebook social media market leader known for its strict content policy pertaining to nudity and sex. As one of the founders explains, the rationale was to 'create a similar site where you *must* show naked pictures' (Radio Rock 2016). Initially a DIY enterprise, Alaston Suomi grew rapidly and currently has some 120,000 registered users (in a country of 5,6 million people). An established brand, it allows for free and premium memberships while much of the posted content can be viewed without registration. Despite automated translations being available in six other languages, the site

operates in, and the bulk of exchanges on it take place in Finnish. Compared to LC's focus on swingers and libertines and Darkside's emphasis on kink, Alaston Suomi represents something of an 'all-purpose' platform accommodating a range of sexual identifications, interests, and pursuits.

In their different functionalities, these platforms include features similar to hookup apps, social media platforms, and messenger apps. Their users, well versed in social media ecosystems, may use them in off-label ways to serve locative, hook-up oriented, self-expressive, performative, or information gathering functions. These platforms allow for, and collapse, multiple layers of locative sense-making: placing oneself on a sexual map, making oneself visible and accessible for sexual relating, and reconfiguring places and locations on sexual terms. Whereas the field of geographies of sexuality has been primarily devoted to queer sexual identities and practices (Browne and Brown 2016, 2), this article focuses on other kinds of sexual boundary practices that trouble hetero-normalcy—such as public, promiscuous, and play-based forms of sex—without excluding heterosexuality.

Locating sex: searching, connecting, hooking up

'To locate' is a matter of wayfinding; orienting oneself so as to identify or discover the place or location of something, or someone. The platforms we investigate operate as spatialized tools for digital wayfinding in helping to locate partners and sites of sexual play—from LC's explicit hookup functionality, via Darkside's modest hookup affordances, to Alaston Suomi's more implicit hookup possibilities. Building on Tim Ingold's (2009) notion of 'way-faring,' Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink (2014) write of digital wayfaring in order to conceptualize the continuous interweaving of the physical and the digital in everyday mobile media uses that produce new social spaces through movement. In our study, the digital becomes an orientation device for actualizing encounters in the flesh and by putting bodies in motion (sometimes necessitating local, national, or even transnational travels). These movements and encounters in turn leave traces in, and feed back into digital spaces and modes of sociability. However, wayfinding on these platforms emerges from more than just platform functionality and features.

Of the platforms, the Estonian LC is the most explicitly focused on encouraging wayfinding as its users are interested in finding, screening, selecting, and getting together with others. The founders, too, describe LC as a 'social media platform' geared towards 'meeting people.' Because of this, users' geographical location is an important functional and meaning making category on the platform. Reporting one's location is mandatory when setting up a profile, and when a location is entered, the system attempts translating it into GPS data and, if successful, communicates a relative location (e.g., 5 kilometers away) to all those viewing the profile. The default distance is

50 km, although options expand up to 10,000 km and users can be searched by distance.

In contrast, Darkside is imprecise in its geolocative search functions only allowing searches by county. Nonetheless, several of the participants occasionally use the site as a jumping off point for play dates with strangers. They appreciate the clear, kink framing offered by the platform, the fact that the context is given, as most of them are not interested in non-kinky encounters. A queer female participant compared Darkside with the dating app Tinder, which due to its hetero-normal framing forced her to be very explicit in terms of desires and preferences in ways that made her feel uneasy. Stating: 'I want to feel small, I want to be dominated,' on Tinder felt: 'too offensive, too vulgar, too sexual,' she said. Tinder's superior wayfinding affordances could not compensate for the vulnerability its explicit heteronormativity created for a user with minoritarian sexual preferences. For its part, Alaston Suomi includes the possibility for users to list their city or region of residence in order to broadly ground their visual displays in geographical terms. While the site is used for hooking up, this is not aided by platform design except for the option of searching by location: people simply have to sort out the locations among themselves. According to a circa 30-year-old gay male user, hooking up through the platform is more common in the cities in comparison to users residing in rural areas who organize meetups and other gatherings, even as 'there are users all over Finland who publish more or less stuff on the site.'

Such sexual wayfinding resonates clearly with the use of dating and hookup apps. An app such as Grindr builds on a 'zero feet away' geolocative logic of instant gratification (Batiste 2013), fostering spatio-temporal sexual norms around immediacy and geographical proximity often imagined as closely aligned with urban gay male desires. The uses intended or encouraged by app design do not, however, necessarily equate the practices and experiences of actual users. Stefanie Duguay (2019) argues that queer female Tinder users experience a scarcity of dating options even in urban contexts, calling into question the idea that apps unproblematically link people and places by bridging geographical constraints. Similarly, Jed Brubaker, Ananny, and Crawford (2016, 5) show how the use of hookup apps in sparsely populated rural areas may in fact emphasize an 'absence of connection.' In addition, people can insert false locations so as to not be outed in rural areas and smaller towns, opting for a nearby city instead. Whether on a dating app or on a sexual social media site, incongruences between reported and factual places of residence are used strategically to strengthen anonymity and safety—a practice also used on all three of studied platforms, but in particular Alaston Suomi (Breitschuh and Göretz 2019; Albury and Byron 2016). To illustrate the complex links between location and sexual wayfinding, we will next discuss how distance and proximity are interpreted and negotiated.

Negotiating proximity and distance

Negotiations of proximity, distance, and scarcity are prevalent across our platforms, although with different emphases on the material and the symbolic. On LC, users ambivalently imagine Estonia as both *too small and not small enough* for their preferred sexual practices. This means that while distance from others is a key criterium of wayfinding, it is an *interpretative distance*. A single, female Libertine user of LC pointed out that after the initial phase of enthusiastic participation in events, she no longer considers herself to be ‘available for dates,’ because ‘I don’t think there are many users from my town, or if there are, I don’t necessarily want to meet them, because I live in a small place.’ In the same interview she elaborates that the capital, where most events take place, and where she used to go when she was more curious, is *too far* for her now that she has sated her initial appetites. In her own town, however, the presumed social proximity carries a variety of risks. Elaborating on this intersection of desire and distance, a heterosexual swinger couple recounted: ‘when we just entered this world (...) we might have met 100-200 people in the first half a year.’ This was possible both because they had not yet met most of the eligible playmates in closer proximity, and because they were more willing to travel. By the time of the interview, they had settled into more of a routine with a core group of partners, pointing out that the popular axiom that ‘Estonia is small enough to drive through’ is simply not true as ‘even 50 kilometers becomes too far’ when you do it regularly. Their experience of distance has been structured by gradients of desire, enthusiasm, and a slowly growing network of recurring partners accessible without the help of the platform.

A variant of desire also entangles with proximity and distance on Alaston Suomi where a quotidian, generic signifier such as a dick pic can gain local recognizability through its proximity to cultural markers allowing for a sense of familiarity without compromising user anonymity. Regional recognizability, in combination with anonymity, adds to voyeuristic pleasures connected to potential spatial proximity that manifest in the titillating thought that ‘it could be anyone’—or, more precisely, ‘it could be someone next door.’ In countries with relatively small populations, and with some users posting nude photos showing their faces or other identifiable markers such as tattoos, hairstyles, or personal fashions for public viewing, this may indeed be the case. The obvious downside of this involves the possibility of being identified against one’s will—a risk that users are actively aware of, yet willing to take. Here, platform relationality not merely bridges or overcomes (physical) distance by bringing people together but, intersecting with risk, safety, vulnerability, and anonymity, creates imaginaries of proximity and distance.

Physical locations are necessarily connected to possibilities for sexual expression, as there tends to be less room for alternative sexualities in rural

areas, or in regions dominated by conservative Christianity (e.g., Gray 2009). For someone whose sexuality is in conflict with the norms of their immediate local community (users of all of our platforms can be considered to violate some norms of 'appropriate' sexual behavior), a sex-positive platform can be a lifeline allowing for sexual knowledge, peer support, embodied and erotic self-expression, and the possibility of gathering in a safer space—be this a digital one, or a place that one enters fully in the flesh.

Regional and cultural specificity can further fuel a sense of safety while also fostering resonance based on recognizability. A queer female participant recounted how BDSM literature written within the U.S. context never spoke to her directly, and it was not until she came across a series of diary entries on Darkside that were chronicling secret play sessions at Ica (a Swedish chain of grocery stores with roots in the 1930s) that something shifted in her. 'It made me aware of a completely different way of being in my sexuality. This parallel world that I'm sharing with others.' The cultural proximity of the event not only opened up a possibility to imagine the exceedingly familiar space of a grocery store differently. It also rendered her desire intelligible.

The three platforms relate quite concretely to intelligibility in a Butlerian sense, as they provide spaces where the participants feel they make sense, or even exist. As Judith Butler (2004, 3–4) asks, 'If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live? Will there be a place for my life, and will it be recognizable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence?' Swedish BDSM and kink geographies need to be understood against the background of sexual marginalization. Even if consensual BDSM is legal, the law does not recognize it as a form of sexual orientation so that it is unprotected by anti-discrimination laws. The participants speak of how their sexual desires and practices would be virtually unintelligible in their wider circles of friends and followers on mainstream social media platforms, making clear how, even in relation to supposedly sexually liberated Swedishness, there are distinct limits for what constitutes intelligible desires and lives.

Alaston Suomi, too, allows for a reworking of Finnishness as a platform liberated from the social norms and hierarchies delimiting sexual expression, bodily visibility, and the articulation of desires in the society at large. The Finnishness made on the platform is often kinky, occasionally queer, and consistently shameless in how different bodies reach out and open up for the eyes of others. All this bears a random relation to the normative notions of healthy and good sex, as promoted in sexual education resources and other public discourses (see Paasonen 2009). The site brings together people from different localities and backgrounds, enabling intense feelings of affiliation—but equally those of exclusion and ostracism. In the current political climate of anti-immigration activism and national populism where some definitions of Finnishness come embedded in exclusive, ethno-nationalist

notions of belonging (Pantti et al. 2019), Alaston Suomi is both inclusive in the range of bodies it features and, similarly to other social media platforms, facilitates practices of segregation on the basis of origin, appearance, and language. According to a cis-gendered heterosexual male cross-dresser born in the 1970s, 'It can be a really important connection for smaller places [of residence] to see Finns from different parts.' Meanwhile, non-Finnish users were described as generally welcomed and interesting 'extra spice,' yet also as subject to potential discrimination.

It remains crucial to ask *whose* sense of belonging is stronger and which users may be excluded from networks of sociability dependent on cultural norms and forms of privilege one is assumed to share. This question is, by default, tied to the demographic makeup of our volunteer participants, and their specific ways of relating to Estonianness, Swedishness, and Finnishness, respectively. But it is also tied to how national belonging in our contexts is contoured by whiteness, and how norms regulating gender and sexuality take shape in communities supposedly less constrained by hetero-normalcy.

Location and locatedness are, in sum, imagined and created in a number of ways as geographical, normative, and cultural distance and proximity are imagined on and through the platforms. In contrast to how researchers of mobile and locative media emphasize a layering, or co-presence of digital and physical spaces (de Souza e Silva 2006; Hjorth and Lim 2012), our platforms show how digital sexual geographies also take shape through experiences of local scarcity, cultural proximity, and experiential distance. Distance here becomes an obstacle in geographies of hooking up, but it can equally be a shield of protection against the vulnerabilities and risks linked to unwanted openness and outness.

Sexualizing physical spaces

In addition to operating as devices for sexual wayfinding, our platforms help to sexualize and reimagine physical spaces—from sexualizing a particular beach to re-signifying a category of places (spas and saunas), and to reshaping the imaginary of a nation state. On LC, the reimagining of locations as sexual is part of the platform vision and interface design. LC was born from the founders' personal frustration with how difficult it was to find lifestyle-friendly beaches when travelling, and users are incentivized (they receive platform specific tokens) to submit 'community friendly locations' into a specific menu item on the site. The current list of kinky locations includes 77 entries from 20 countries, most of them sex clubs and nude beaches. The platform thus invites users to imagine places as 'kinky,' but in some cases also to *overwrite* less sexual places so as to make them 'community friendly.' This connects to a material practice known as 'takeovers' where resorts and hotels are used in lifestyle-specific ways, usually including a temporary suspension of rules

regarding public nudity and sex. However, ways of imagining locations as kinky on LC extend the site-specific feature as users continue casting places as sexual in personals and chat group themes. Thus, 'in the nature'—a common Estonian geographic imaginary for the summer season—takes on a sexual overtone and becomes kinky, as do spas and saunas.

Alaston Suomi is explicitly rooted in the local not only through its main language of operation (Finnish) but through its name ('Naked Finland') gesturing towards a nation-state (Finland). If, in terms of geopolitical imaginaries, a nation-state's territory can be considered a 'container' filled with specific meanings accumulating over time in processes of nation-building (Häkli 1999, 124; Paasi 1990), Alaston Suomi both builds on existing imaginaries and reshapes them in its abundant and explicit displays of naked bodies, bodily fluids, and fetishes. Both the visual landscape and uses of Alaston Suomi are tightly connected to the physical locations that they simultaneously transcend. In visual sexual placemaking, people pose in city parks, in forests, at summer cottages, and by the lakeside, transforming mundane spaces—simultaneously recognizable and generic—into sites of exhibitionism, cross-dressing, group sex, and kink play. Through the marker of 'Finland,' the site performs territorial, linguistic, and cultural boundary work in terms of its assumed members and users; through the marker of nudity, it defines undress as the default mode of social relating. It joins users into something of a nation exposed, or a nation where belonging is defined in terms of naked displays and exchanges, making room for unclothed self-expression in a region where, as one participant pointed out, showing skin in public is complicated due to the climate alone.

Just as Alaston Suomi operates through cultural and linguistic codes of Finnishness, to feel at home on Darkside is a combination of the site's 'Swedishness'—the language, the terminology, the cultural context—and, above all, its local embeddedness, as the people you connect with are often close to you geographically. Many participants are part of an international network of kinksters, and they use FetLife for international kink travels, mainly to Berlin. There is thus a certain linguistic fluency and a habit of moving between contexts, but things do get lost in translation. To feel safe on Darkside is also a matter of how the platform is used to negotiate safety in the midst of sexual practices that could be considered risky (cf. Albury and Byron 2016; see also Newmahr 2011, 166–186). The geographical dimension of this safety is intimately tied to the Swedish language, as linguistic proximity creates a sense of safety. The users of Alaston Suomi similarly spoke of linguistic and regional specificity as breeding a sense of trust and intimacy of the kind more difficult to accomplish in internationally operating services. While the interface of LC is in English and the developers have international ambition, a majority of the users is currently from Estonia. Some interviewees felt it safer to only play during international travel, yet being able to

communicate in Estonian with potential partners was consistently elevated as a safety mechanism for avoiding disappointments and awkwardness.

Localizing and re-platforming sex

'To localize' is a matter of confining to a particular location, to make local, or to orient locally. Sexual social media platforms are not mere mediators in the sense of facilitating hooking up and ways of reimagining physical locations. They equally assemble localized online places for flirtation, imagination, visibility, and appreciation, which interlink bodies, visual pleasures, risks, and vulnerabilities within the confines of platform affordances. Put differently, they function as places of their own in that some users communicate on-platform only, without any aim of extending sexual sociability beyond its confines. Platforms operate as sites for seeing and being seen, whether the user takes pleasure in testing out their sexual attractiveness through rating systems and listings of top pictures, or whether they enjoy these sites as ones of outness in terms of sexual preferences in the realm of kink deemed unorthodox. There is a sense of safety and control to relating through networked means and ways of self-display, even as all this is conditioned and structured by the functionalities of the platforms.

The ways in which sex is located and localized on and beyond these platforms thus challenge the common notion of how digital and social media in general, and dating and hookup apps in particular, primarily help to overcome distance. Physical proximity is obviously a key factor to sex and sites of sexual play, and there are powerful ways in which our platforms bring people together in this sense. But equally important seems our participants' investments in a range of pleasurable proximities and distances across different scales: from the geographical to the cultural and the imaginary (it could be someone next door!). While connecting people and bringing them close, our platforms also afford a way of playing with and at a distance—as there can be safety to distance—in relation to which specifically regional geographic imaginaries create their own sense of proximity, cultural intelligibility, and belonging. Cockayne, Leszczynski, and Zook (2017) similarly trace how digital forms of intimacy not only extend spaces of sexuality beyond the immediately proximate, but also intensify these encounters in ways that make them *feel* more proximate. To this we would add that the networked intimacy of our three platforms is not only created through a sense of intensified proximity, but also through a distinct sense of distance, echoing Gill Valentine's (2008, 2103) understanding of how digitally mediated distance does not necessarily cut intimacy short. In order to feel seen, to feel connected, and to feel close, some kind of distance can also be necessary to open up spaces for playful, sexual tension, for desire to circulate, and for relational dynamics enhanced by sexual social media to emerge.

The practices of digital sexual placemaking explored in this article show how proximity and distance do not form a binary, but are rather brought together along a spectrum of imaginaries of sociability based on gradients of pleasure. These practices and pleasures move from a sense of desired proximity in instances when the whole point of the connection is to physically meet up; to how geographical proximity adds a layer of pleasure and excitement in knowing that an encounter could happen, even when a desire to meet up is lacking; to how geographical distance functions as a safety net which leaves plenty of space for collaborative fantasies that feed off of the improbability of the encounter; to how geographical distance instead provides a barrier to even imagining the contours of something, as one's desire is exclusively linked to physical meetups.

There is a range of tensions to the uses of the platforms explored in this article, ranging from uneasy negotiations of belonging and exclusion to the vulnerabilities involved in visibility, outing, and sexual relating, yet their value is equally manifest among the participants. Sexual social media platforms expand potential forms of sociability, afford sexual expression and self-discovery, and help to re-signify and reimagine one's immediate and more distant environments on sexual terms. In contrast with social media giants banning nudity and sexual display in the abstract name of safety, these sites aim to cater spaces for sexual relating so that bodily displays become detached from normative notions of offensiveness as sites of appreciation and enjoyment. In different ways, the platforms help to craft out sexual maps of places to hook up, party, and play in so that otherwise mundane sites become reframed and, thus, to a degree transformed. In doing so, they craft out erotic, ludic topographies (Bell and Valentine 1995, 16) of sexual relating and belonging that are not void of risk, yet are not framed as risky by default.

Studying regional platforms that may seem marginal in the context of the current de-platforming of sex on U.S.-based social media platforms has the potential to open new avenues towards understanding sexual cultures, digital sexual geographies, as well as networked sociality more broadly. Our research demonstrates the profound significance of sexual social media as spaces where people feel they make sense and have a right to exist. These three platforms allow for wayfinding both in terms of self-discovery and making meaningful connections with others in environments where diverse bodily displays and pleasures are appreciated and cherished, rather than censored or shamed. The current de-platforming of sex ignores a vital aspect of human experience by dismissing the value of sex and sexuality in people's lives: this causes damage to queer and kink communities in particular. Digital sexual spaces that challenge the horizontal logic of respectability on regional grounds are then vital in creating spatial possibilities for sexual worldmaking, belonging, and existing.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the suggestions of the two anonymous reviewers, whose input made this article stronger, as well as for the work and support of the two editors of this special issue, Cesare Di Felicianantonio and Valerie De Craene. This work was supported by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies [grant number 1035-3.1.1-2019] and The Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland [grant number 327391].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Östersjöstiftelsen and The Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland [grant number 327391].

Notes on contributors

Jenny Sundén is Professor of Gender Studies at Södertörn University in Stockholm. Her work is situated at the intersection of digital media studies, gender and sexuality studies, feminist and queer theory, and affect theory. She is currently working on digital intimacy, disconnection, and delay; feminist social media tactics that use humor to counter sexism; and the geopolitics of digital sexual cultures.

Susanna Paasonen is Professor of Media Studies at University of Turku, and Head of department. With an interest in studies of networked media, sexuality, and affect, she publishes broadly on these topics. Her current research interests revolve around discourses of addiction connected to online pornography and the multiple meanings of intimacy in data-driven culture.

Katrin Tiidenberg is Professor of Participatory Culture at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School of Tallinn University. She has published extensively on social media practices and visual and sexual cultures on social media. Her research interests include digital research ethics and visual research methods. Currently she is researching the role of social media in young people's political life and adult digital sexual cultures on local platforms. More info at: katrin-tiidenberg.com.

Maria Vihlman is a PhD student in Gender Studies at University of Turku and Head of Counselling at Sexpo Foundation. Her research focuses on networked means of sexual relating, with a special focus on the nude image gallery, Alastonsuomi.

ORCID

Jenny Sundén  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6047-4369>

Susanna Paasonen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6319-9155>

Katrin Tiidenberg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7895-7617>

Maria Vihlman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9815-5670>

References

- Albury, Kath, and Paul Byron. 2016. "Safe on my Phone? Same-Sex Attracted Young People's Negotiations of Intimacy, Visibility, and Risk on Digital Hook-up Apps." *Social Media + Society* 2 (4): 205630511667288. doi:10.1177/2056305116672887.
- Andreassen, Rikke, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, and Tobias Raun, eds. 2018. *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Batiste, Dominique Pierre. 2013. "0 Feet Away': The Queer Cartography of French Gay Men's Geo-Social Media Use." *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 22 (2): 111–132. doi:10.3167/ajec.2013.220207.
- Bell, David, and Gill Valentine. 1995. "Introduction: Orientations." In *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, edited by David Bell and Gill Valentine, 1–27. London: Routledge.
- Bonner-Thompson, Carl. 2017. "The Meat Market': production and Regulation of Masculinities on the Grindr Grid in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK." *Gender, Place & Culture* 24 (11): 1611–1625. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1356270.
- Breitschuh, Vanessa, and Julia Göretz. 2019. "User Motivation and Personal Safety on a Mobile Dating App." In *Social Computing and Social Media: Design, Human Behavior and Analytics*, edited by Gabriele Meiselwitz, 278–292. Cham: Springer.
- Browne, Kath, and Gavin Brown. 2016. "An Introduction to the Geographies of Sex and Sexualities." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities*, edited by Gavin Brown and Kath Browne, 1–12. London: Routledge.
- Brubaker, Jed R., Mike Ananny, and Kate Crawford. 2016. "Departing Glances: A Sociotechnical account of 'Leaving' Grindr." *New Media & Society* 18 (3): 373–390. doi:10.1177/1461444814542311.
- Butler, Judith. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Byron, Paul. 2019. "How Could You Write Your Name below That?' The Queer Life and Death of Tumblr." *Porn Studies* 6 (3): 336–349. doi:10.1080/23268743.2019.1613925.
- Campbell, John Edward. 2001. *Guts and Muscles and Bears, oh my! The Body, Embodied Identity, and Queer Erotic Spaces Online*. MA-thesis. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- Campbell, John Edward. 2004. *Getting it on Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cho, Alexander. 2018. "Default Publicness: Queer Youth of Color, Social Media, and Being Outed by the Machine." *New Media & Society* 20 (9): 3183–3200. doi:10.1177/1461444817744784.
- Cockayne, Daniel, Agnieszka Leszczynski, and Matthew Zook. 2017. "#HotForBots: Sex, the Non-Human and Digitally Mediated Spaces of Intimate Encounter." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 35 (6): 1115–1133.
- Cockayne, Daniel, and Lizzie Richardson. 2017. "Queering Code/Space: The co-Production of Socio-Sexual Codes and Digital Technologies." *Gender, Place & Culture* 24 (11): 1642–1658. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1339672.
- Correll, Shelley. 1995. "The Ethnography of an Electronic Bar: The Lesbian Café." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 24 (3): 270–298. doi:10.1177/089124195024003002.
- David, Gaby, and Carolina Cambre. 2016. "Screened Intimacies: Tinder and the Swipe Logic." *Social Media & Society* 2 (2): 1–11.
- de Souza e Silva, Adriana. 2006. "From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces." *Space and Culture* 9 (3): 261–278. doi:10.1177/1206331206289022.
- Dobson, Amy Shields, Brady Robards, and Nicholas Carah, eds. 2018. *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Duguay, Stefanie. 2017. "Dressing Up Cinderella: Interrogating Authenticity Claims on the Mobile Dating App Tinder." *Information, Communication & Society* 20 (3): 351–367. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2016.1168471.
- Duguay, Stefanie. 2019. "There's no One New around You': Queer Women's Experiences of Scarcity in Geospatial Partner-Seeking on Tinder." In *The Geographies of Digital Sexuality*, edited by Catherine J. Nash and Andrew Gorman-Murray, 93–114. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gray, Mary L. 2009. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. New York: NYU Press.
- Häkli, Jouni 1999. "Cultures of Demarcation: territory and National Identity in Finland." In *Nested Identities: Nationalism, Territory, and Scale*, edited by Guntram H. Herb and David H. Kaplan, 123–150. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Hjorth, Larissa, and Sun Sun Lim. 2012. "Mobile Intimacy in an Age of Affective Mobile Media." *Feminist Media Studies* 12 (4): 477–484. doi:10.1080/14680777.2012.741860.
- Hjorth, Larissa, and Sarah Pink. 2014. "New Visualities and the Digital Wayfarer: Reconceptualizing Phone Photography and Locative Media." *Mobile Media & Communication* 2 (1): 40–57. doi:10.1177/2050157913505257.
- Ingold, Tim. 2009. *Lines: A Brief History*. London: Routledge.
- Light, Ben., Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay. 2018. "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps." *New Media & Society* 20 (3): 881–900. doi:10.1177/1461444816675438.
- Miles, Sam. 2017. "Sex in the Digital City: location-Based Dating Apps and Queer Urban Life." *Gender, Place & Culture* 24 (11): 1595–1610. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2017.1340874.
- Molldrem, Stephen 2019. "Big Tech's War on Sex." *The Fight Magazine*. January 4. <https://thefightmag.com/2019/01/big-techs-war-on-sex/>.
- Mowlabocus, Sharif 2016. "Horny at the Bus Stop, Paranoid in the Cul-de-Sac: Sex, Technology and Public Space." In *The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities*, edited by Gavin Brown and Kath Browne, 391–398. London: Routledge.
- Nash, Catherine J. and Andrew Gorman-Murray, eds. 2019. *The Geographies of Digital Sexuality*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Newmahr, Staci 2011. *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Paasi, Anssi 1990. "The Rise and Fall of Finnish Geopolitics." *Political Geography Quarterly* 9 (1): 53–65. doi:10.1016/0260-9827(90)90006-V.
- Paasonen, Susanna 2009. "Healthy Sex and Pop Porn: Pornography, Feminism and the Finnish Context." *Sexualities* 12 (5): 586–604. doi:10.1177/1363460709340369.
- Paasonen, Susanna 2017. "Infrastructures of Intimacy." In *Mediated Intimacies: Connectivities, Relationalities and Proximities*, edited by Rikke Andreassen, Michael Nebeling Petersen, Katherine Harrison, and Tobias Raun, 103–116. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Paasonen, Susanna, and Jenny Sundén. forthcoming. "Objectionable Nipples: Puritan Data Politics and Sexual Agency in Social Media." In *Queer Data*, edited by Patrick Keilty. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Pantti, Mervi, Matti Nelimarkka, Kaarina Nikunen, and Gavan Titley. 2019. "The Meanings of Racism: Public Discourses about Racism in Finnish News Media and Online Discussion Forums." *European Journal of Communication* 34 (5): 503–519. doi:10.1177/0267323119874253.
- Pilipets, Elena, and Susanna Paasonen. 2022. "Nipples, Memes and Algorithmic Failure: NSFW Critique of Tumblr Censorship." *New Media & Society* 24 (6): 1459–1480. doi:10.1177/1461444820979280.

- Race, Kane 2015a. "Party and Play': Online Hook-up Devices and the Emergence of PNP Practices among Gay Men." *Sexualities* 18 (3): 253–275. doi:10.1177/1363460714550913.
- Race, Kane 2015b. "Speculative Pragmatism and Intimate Arrangements: online Hook-up Devices in Gay Life." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17 (4): 496–511. doi:10.1080/13691058.2014.930181.
- Radio Rock. 2016. Alastonsuomi.com -verkkosivun perustaja Hermanni Jokinen: kaikki lähti vitsistä liikkeelle, 2 May, <https://www.ruutu.fi/video/2606170>.
- Rambukkana, Nathan. 2007. "Taking the Leather Out of Leather Sex: The Internet, Identity, and the Sodomasochistic Public Sphere." In *Queer Online: Media Technology & Sexuality*, edited by Kate O'Riordan and David J. Phillips, 67–80. New York: Peter Lang.
- Solomun, Sonja. 2021. "Reorienting Platform Power: Building a platform governance research network." *Data & Society: Points*. Blog post. February 16. <https://points.datasociety.net/reorienting-platform-power-831f960c797c>.
- Sundén, Jenny. 2003. *Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Sundén, Jenny. 2018. "Queer disconnections: Affect, break, and delay in digital connectivity." *Transformations* 31. http://www.transformationsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Trans31_04_sunden.pdf.
- Sundén, Jenny, Katrin Tiidenberg, Susanna Paasonen, and Maria Vihlman. 2021. "Space, Place and Location in Sexual Social Media." *Presentation at The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers* doi:<https://spir.aoir.org/ojs/index.php/spir/article/download/12132/10238/75756>.
- Tiidenberg, Katrin, and Emily van der Nagel. 2020. *Sex and Social Media*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Valentine, Gill 2008. "The Ties That Bind: Towards Geographies of Intimacy." *Geography Compass* 2 (6): 2097–2110. doi:10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00158.x.
- Wakeford, Nina 1996. "Sexualized Bodies in Cyberspace." In *Beyond the Book: Theory, Culture, and the Politics of Cyberspace*, edited by Warren Chernaik, Marilyn Deegan, and Andrew Gibson, 93–104. Oxford: Office for Humanities Communication Publications.