GENDER, CULTURE, AND MORALITY: A CASE STUDY OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S NEGOTIATIONS OF SEXUAL INTIMACY ONLINE

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Burcu Korkmazer

Ghent University

Burcu Korkmazer is a PhD student at the Department of Communication Sciences of Ghent University and a member of CIMS, the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies. Her research interests include social media, gender and diversity and cultural media studies.

Contact:Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 41, Ghent 9000, Belgium.

E-mail: Burcu.korkmazer@ugent.be

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5334-5008

Sander De Ridder

University of Antwerp

Sander De Ridder is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Antwerp. His research engages with the role of digital and data-driven media in culture and society.

Contact:Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerpen, Belgium.

E-mail: Sander.deridder@uantwerpen.be

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3475-0523

Sofie Van Bauwel

Ghent University

Sofie Van Bauwel is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Ghent University and a member of the CIMS, the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies. Her main field of interest is gender, sexuality, media, film, television and popular culture.

Contact: Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 41, Ghent 9000, Belgium.

E-mail: sofie.vanbauwel@ugent.be

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8554-2452

ABSTRACT

This study adds to the existing literature on mediated sexual intimacy by exploring young people's negotiations of sexual self-representations online within a culturally diverse sample. We apply a discourse-theoretical analysis to the data gathered using our visual creative methodology consisting of six focus groups with youngsters between the ages of 13 and 20

years old (N = 57). Although the representation of youth in public and academic discourses is often white, gendered, and heteronormative, diversity is growing within digital youth cultures. Our analysis shows that this diversity affects the moral negotiations of young people by providing specific understandings of gender in relation to ethnic-cultural and religious identities.

KEYWORDS: Social media, Gender, Culture, Youth, Intimacy, Moral negotiation

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary digital youth cultures, young people are capturing and presenting their intimate selves in a performative and visual way online (Hand 2012; Highfield and Leaver 2015). Due to the increased presence of visual social media (e.g. Instagram and Snapchat) in the everyday lives of young people, the private realm has merged into a (semi-)public sphere, affecting the sense-making practices of young people. Social media are not only discursive spaces but also normative and peer-controlled spaces where negotiations on gender, culture, and intimacy occur. By using these visual social media, young people develop and reflect upon their intimate, sexual, and gendered identities (Bond 2011). This often results in self-representations presenting and centering the intimate self, making it interesting to look at these intimate self-representations as they create specific contexts that implicitly communicate moral norms on gendered and cultural identities (De Ridder 2014). Sharing intimate pictures through social media is not only a way to create spaces of intimacy and connect with peers (Livingstone 2008) but also requires complex moral negotiations on which information can be shared with peers and which cannot (Hand 2012). The moral negotiations young people have to make online are often linked to their gendered and sexual identities (De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2013). The self-representations of young girls, and their moral negotiations on sexual intimacy in particular, have been studied extensively (Ringrose et al. 2013; Albury 2015; Cooper et al. 2016). However, moral negotiations are related to several axes of identity—such as gender, ethnicity, religiosity, class, and age—that simultaneously intersect in people's lives (Crenshaw, 1989; Carastathis, 2014). Moral negotiations on sexual intimacy are therefore not only gendered but also culturally influenced. Culture, referring to the specific character of a social group, manifests in the beliefs, values, and norms of its members. These cultural assumptions provide a basis for interpreting social interactions (Brett and Gelfand 2005), producing a social reality wherein these interpretations are formed and negotiated through interactions between the self and others (Van Zoonen 1994). Although young people in contemporary youth cultures are interacting within culturally diverse contexts, this diversity is often overlooked when studying the mediated sexual intimacy of young people online.

Therefore, it is necessary to explore the discursive understandings and negotiations that young people have on gender, culture, and morality from an intersectional perspective. How do young people negotiate sexual intimacy on visual social media? How is this related to social, gendered, and cultural moral norms? As social media are discursive spaces where power relations and struggles for meaning are produced (Mills 2003), we explore young people's discourses on gender, culture, and morality in relation to sexual and intimate self-representations online. Our study relies on a qualitative research design using a visual creative methodology (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006). We worked with six groups of young people (N = 57) between 13 and 20 years old. Our qualitative data consist of a discourse-theoretical analysis of these young people's negotiations on gender, culture, and morality online (Polkinghorne 1995; Riessman 1993). In our analysis, we depart from an intersectional framework as we are interested in understanding the processes of power and negotiation at multiple levels of social interaction

(Carastathis 2014). First, we look at how the moral negotiations of young people on mediated sexual intimacy are gendered. Second, we explore how axes of power, such as gender, ethnic–cultural background, and religiosity, intersect and add to their understanding of sexual self-representations as gendered and cultural moral negotiations, both on a self-presentational level and on an interpersonal level in the form of sexting. Moreover, we pay particular attention to how youth's understanding of sexual intimacy is being shaped by specific peer cultures and social media cultures.

MEDIATED SEXUAL INTIMACY ON VISUAL SOCIAL MEDIA

Popular social media such as Instagram and Snapchat are platforms that are explicitly centered around the visual (Highfield and Leaver 2016). Young people use these social media to record their daily events, present their intimate selves, and think about what types of self-representations are socially acceptable to be visible online (Baym 2010; Woodward 2015; Grogan *et al.* 2018). In particular, when it comes to their intimate self-representations, young people continuously negotiate which aspects of their intimate selves can be made visible and for whom. This act of sharing intimate self-representations is not only an example of the intertwining of online and offline experiences but also challenges the traditional public/private divide, creating a 'public intimacy' (Miguel 2018). As Lasén and Gómez-Cruz (2009) suggest, digital self-portraits are shaping the bodies and subjectivities of young people. The (public) visibility that is afforded by these (private) self-portraits has become 'the guarantee of the subject's being' (214) and needs to be understood as primarily a way to obtain recognition among peers. Although social media platform architecture fosters the "making public" of information previously defined as private (Van Dijck 2013), using visual content to establish intimacy through social media is morally shaping young people's understandings of intimate self-representations.

Previous research has mainly studied the gendered dynamics of visual intimacy online and is generally based on the understanding of intimate self-representations as "either incorporating or resisting dominant gender and sexual ideologies" (De Ridder 2014: 15). Miguel (2016), for example, argues that patriarchal gender roles that recur offline are also reproduced online, particularly when it comes to the intimate self-portraits of young girls. According to García-Gómez (2017; 2018), young girls are discursively negotiating their gendered identity online within heteronormative frames of sexual agency. His study suggests that intimate practices, such as sexting, generate a tension between a (feminine) discourse of empowerment and the conformity to heteronormative cultural ideals. Yet, sexting practices enable young girls to discursively construct different femininities online and to regulate in-group and out-group sexualities (García-Gómez 2019b). De Ridder (2018) clarifies how this sharing of intimate and sexual images online can also carry a sexual stigma, resulting in young people being cautious when sharing intimate visual content online such as sexy selfies or (semi-)nude pictures. Young girls in particular are more reflective and aware of the social norms on visibility for female bodies (Piazzesi and Mongrain 2019). Moreover, young people perceive the sharing of intimate and sexual images as risky because these images could easily be shared without their consent, resulting in the blurring of traditional boundaries of risk and trust. Although these topics are discussed within schools (Dobson and Ringrose 2016) and other peer groups, such as youth organizations, young people still see themselves as being responsible for managing their own safety online (Livingstone 2002). This feeling of responsibility plays an important part in the construction of their self-representations online because these self-representations consist of negotiations between opportunities for enhancing identity and intimacy and risks regarding privacy and (peer) judgment (Livingstone 2008; boyd 2014).

MORAL NEGOTIATIONS ON GENDER, CULTURE, AND INTIMACY

Negotiation, indicating a form of decision making that occurs when people are in interdependent relations, often has morality at its core (Brett and Gelfand 2005; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013). As "morals become transported into stable, durable dispositions through ongoing, everyday practice" (Winchester 2008: 1773), people build and negotiate their identities and reputations based on how they should act in relation to others. This state of interdependency within social interaction makes it possible to understand moral negotiations as the outcome of dialogue among peers (Gergen 1991; Hill 1996).

These moral negotiations are also present within digital youth cultures (Ito *et al*. 2009), where young people "monitor their digital actions with an audience in mind" (Marwick 2012: 379). They have complex value systems based on moral negotiations upon which they rely when constructing their (online) identities (Thomson and Holland 2002; Turkle 2011). Therefore, young people's negotiations of gender and sexual identities online need to be understood as social, cultural, and gendered moral struggles. Intimate self-representations, in particular, often reveal the dominant morality on gender and sexuality within digital youth cultures (De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2013). As social media are normative and visual spaces, merging 'making visible' with 'making public' (Ibrahim 2012), youth self-representations are being placed under the moral gaze of their peers. The intensive peer control over intimate, gendered, and sexual self-representations is leading to an increase in the fear of imagined audiences on social media. Peer cultures are essential to understanding young people's moral negotiations because they provide moral definitions of appropriate self-representations online, particularly when it comes to intimate self-representations (which are believed to be in line with the dominant gendered moralities). Young people enjoy the visibility that comes along with social media, as they connect with friends and experiment with identities in a social context, yet they have to balance social, cultural, and gendered moral norms in order to be perceived as both authentic and socially valued (Livingstone 2008; De Ridder 2014). This often invokes in a disciplining power in gender-normative ideals and is generally accepted as a means of social control (Lyon 2006). Visual social media provide categories of self-definition around which young people have to negotiate when constructing their gendered identities (Buckingham and Bragg 2004). These gendered identities are indeed performative (Butler 1990) and meaningful in relation to (visual) social media, as young people learn to interpret — but also to engage — with media in gender-specific ways (Dobson 2014; Garcia-Gomez 2014). Effectively, they learn how to "do" and portray being a boy or girl online (Buckingham and Bragg 2004: 71). Moreover, these self-portraits online are considered "gendered and public representations and performances of the self for oneself and for the others" (Lasén 2015: 64).

Hence, visual social media cultures are affecting young people's understandings and negotiations of intimacy online in specific ways. Since social media are discursive spaces where gendered and cultural moralities are heavily contested, exploring youth discourses on morality and (sexual) intimacy online matters. More specifically, this paper will analyze how young people discursively negotiate morality in relation to intimate and sexual self-representations and how these moral negotiations are guiding their everyday life online.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research design of our study builds on a visual creative methodology using six group conversations between young people between the ages of 13 and 20 years old (N = 57) (Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006). To explore particular discursive understandings in the everyday life contexts of youths, we carried out our research in naturally occurring peer group settings where young people gather and feel safe discussing sensitive topics such as visibility, morality, and intimacy. Therefore, we worked together with several schools and youth organizations located in Dutch-speaking Belgium that are known for engaging with youths from

diverse social groups in terms of their social class, ethnicity, and gender. Since cultural diversity is growing within the population and in particular within (digital) youth cultures, we chose to work with groups of youngsters with diverse identities in terms of their gender, ethnic–cultural background, and educational level. Due to the representation of young people in both the public and the academic discourse as heteronormative and white (Korkmazer, De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2019), our scholarly knowledge might be limited to the moral negotiation processes of white middle-class youth. This is not only a limitation with regard to exploring specific understandings of diverse groups of youth but also overlooks the importance of interactions between majority and minority groups of young people. As they interact with each other both online as offline, their interactions influence the broader gendered and cultural moralities present within digital youth cultures. Moreover, in order to understand the moral negotiation processes of young people regarding intimate self-representations online, it is necessary to take this diversity into account. Furthermore, we anonymized the names of the youngsters we refer to in our findings in order to protect the privacy of our participants. Although we acknowledge that our sample covers a broad age bracket, we carried out our research within similar age groups. These were existing peer groups within schools and youth organizations. To guarantee a safe space in which to discuss these sensitive topics, we did not change the natural composition of these natural peer groups.

School/Youth Organization	**Participants (N = 57)**	**Gender**	**Ethnic–Cultural Diversity**	**Age**
Secondary School	16	Female: 13 Male: 3	Low	16–18
Secondary School	13	Female: 10 Male: 3	High	14–16
Secondary School	10	Female: 9 Male: 1	High	16–20
Youth Organization	9	Female: 0 Male: 9	High	15–16
Youth Organization	6	Female: 4 Male: 2	High	15–18
Youth Organization	3	Female: 1 Male: 2	Low	15–17

Table 1: Overview of the Participants.

As our research takes a particular interest in self-representations on visual social media, we chose to use a visual research methodology. We guided the participants through a creativity activity in which they had to create social media content for a fictional account. More specifically, we put them in groups and asked them to design a fictional social media account in the form of visual collages, for someone with a good reputation, a bad reputation, or an ideal social media account. Although they were free to choose which visual social media they were going to portray, the majority of our participants used the Instagram structure to create the social

media profiles. By motivating the young participants to create their own media texts, we were able to explore their perceptions of specific aspects of media and their relations with media more broadly (Buckingham 2009). For the purposes of this paper, we chose to analyze young people's discursive perceptions and negotiations of mediated sexual intimacy as most of the 'bad' social media profiles were clear portrayals of sexual self-representations and led to extensive group discussion on gender, sexuality, and morality online. Although social media are discursive spaces in which disciplinary power and (gender) normative meanings are present, our specific methodology made it possible to explore youth's understandings beyond this normative frame. By giving them control over the process of data generation and allowing them to discuss fictional social media profiles instead of their own social media content, we tried to create a safe space in which they could freely discuss sensitive topics such as sexuality and morality. By doing so, we tried to empower them by listening to their voices (Lyon 2018; Heath *et al.* 2009) and minimizing our own perceptions as researchers.

The data output of the visual creative methodology consisted of several collages of fictional social media accounts. These collages need to be understood as (textual) sites that represent young people's power struggles (Saukko 2003) as they contained clear constructions and reflections on how they negotiate visibility, sexual intimacy, and morality. The participants were asked to tell the story of their fictional characters and to explain the choices of text and visuals. These stories generated further group discussions on moral negotiations in relation to gendered and cultural norms and on the several social media apps that young people use in their everyday life online. The platforms mentioned most often were Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Messenger, yet the collages were mainly created as Instagram profiles.

For this paper, we analyzed the group discourses during the creative sessions using a discourse-theoretical analysis with a specific focus on the narratives created by these youngsters (Riessman 1993; Saukko 2003; Halkier 2010). We started our analysis by inductively and carefully re-reading our data in detail (Julien, 2008). We searched for narrative and discursive patterns in our data and connected and clustered similar codes into eight themes. We identified these themes as the most significant topics in the narratives of our young participants. We thematically coded their narratives according to the themes: (1) identity, (2) credibility, (3) reputation, (4) (peer) pressure, (5) critical awareness, (6) social media, (7) visibility, and (8) sexting and nudes. For the purposes of this paper, we analyzed the theme 'reputation' in relation to the categories 'good reputation,' 'bad reputation,' 'ideal reputation', 'visibility,' and 'sexting and nudes.' We analyzed the discourses and narratives of youth by exploring their linguistic choices to describe and discuss gender, culture, and (sexual) morality. We looked at the multiple masculinities and femininities that were constructed and mentioned during the creative sessions and how these were related with identity axes such as ethnicity and religiosity. With this methodological frame, we aimed to gain insight into young people's discursive negotiations of gender, culture, and morality in their everyday life online, particularly when (re)presenting the intimate and sexual self on visual social media such as Instagram and Snapchat. The group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed before being coded. We used NVivo software to code the transcripts, paying specific attention to how these young people negotiated gendered and cultural moralities.

FINDINGS

Sexual self-representations as gendered moral negotiations

Intimate self-representations need to be understood as mediated stories affecting the moral negotiation processes of young people on gender, culture, and intimacy (Thumim 2012). These self-representations do not only create a context in which to negotiate gender and sexuality but

are also a reflection of how gender and sexuality are (re)produced and consumed online (De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2013). During our group conversations, we noticed that the moral negotiations on sexual intimacy online were indeed heavily gendered. Although our groups were diverse in terms of their ethnic–cultural and sexual identities, the negotiation process in relation to sexual intimacy was extensively discussed through a gendered lens. These discussions reflected the dominant moral frames on gender that young people use to interpret sexual self-representations such as sexy selfies and nude pictures. While sharing sexy self-representations in itself was not considered problematic by the young people in our groups, it was considered to become so when a peer got the feeling that it was "staged" (Robert, 17). Portraying sexiness within an uncommon context, such as posing in a bikini in the living room, is usually interpreted as being unauthentic. The self-representations of girls were particularly interpreted as "weird" and "inappropriate" (Jane, 17), demonstrating the gendered aspect of this moral negotiation. Sexual self-representations of boys were mentioned less frequently as the young girls in our groups were convinced that "men are allowed to show more nudity than women" (Louise, 17). The public visibility of the (semi-nude) bodies of young boys was disapproved of less, thereby dislocating them from being at the center of sexual morality. The bodies of young boys are not considered to be at the core of moral decisions when negotiating appropriate presentations of intimacy online. This is in contrast with the sexual self-representations of young girls, as described in the following extract:

> Elena (17): If it is someone you know, you'll be like: 'Oh, what is that?!' Like, everyone looks at the pictures of celebrities, but when you see your own friend posting a picture… People will say: 'Yeah, she is a whore, she is a slut!' a lot quicker.

Even though peer groups are important for youth identity construction and moral understandings, young girls sharing intimate and sexual content are often confronted with intrusive forms of sexual harassment such as slutshaming — especially on social media, where sexual harassment perpetrated by peers can be ambiguous at first as the interactions are often more casual (Petersen and Hyde 2013). Yet, girls portraying intimacy online are frequently called out for being a slut, which makes them more common victims of sexual harassment than boys (Hand and Sanchez 2000). This makes young girls very aware of their intimate self-representations because in their case, these self-representations are directly linked to their reputation. Even when they are in a relationship, young girls are very cautious in their online intimacies as they perceive a constant threat of abuse:

> Debby (17): Because when you break up, he can still hurt you by showing the picture to his friends.
>
> Maria (15): When you send nudes to a boy, he will send it to his friends and then it will circulate around the whole school. People will start calling you a 'whore'.
>
> Tiffany (16): Even when he doesn't send it to others, he will still tell them about it. Even if he has deleted the picture he will be like 'yeah, she did send me nudes', and then it will circulate around the whole school again.

While the sharing of intimate self-representations, such as sexy selfies and nudes, is mostly frowned upon by youth regardless of their ethnic–cultural identity, their understanding changes when it happens within the context of a relationship. The young boys in our groups were mostly in favor of sending and receiving intimate pictures when they were in a relationship, as it seemed more appropriate because of the love and trust connection. This is in contrast with the negotiation young girls have to make when engaging in intimate experiences online. As a girl, it is not considered safe to send or share intimate pictures of yourself, even when you are in a

relationship. This risk is making girls more conscious of the potential unwanted outcomes, such as the circulation of their pictures without their consent, but also of other less visual forms of harassment such as gossip. Following this, as opposed to boys, girls are less convinced of the trust connection within a relationship — even when there is no visual content available, there is still the possibility of peers talking about and shaming them for their intimate experiences, and they are convinced that their judging peers will find out. This not only violates their trust but also directly damages their reputation.

However, sexual harassment by peers is often more than the sexual double standards manifesting in the negotiations of gendered morality online. Not only can the sharing of intimate, sexual, and (semi-)nude self-representations be harmful to the reputations of young girls, but the receiving of those self-representations can also cause severe damage. Sexual self-representations, such as 'dickpics' sent by their male peers, are often unwanted, raising questions about the lack of consent between young people:

> Jessica (16): Boys don't realize it. When they are chatting with a girl, they just send it [dickpic] without asking. So we [as girls] have to deal with it and delete those pictures.

This specific understanding that Jessica has of dickpics illustrates that there is a difference in perceptions regarding the consequences of those pictures. Young girls often think that the reputations of boys are less affected by the sending, receiving, or even circulating of dickpics. They can laugh about the whole situation and are usually seen as 'cool' people. Yet, the conversation between Drake (17) and Jessica (16), who are both active within the same artistic youth organization but attend different schools, makes it clear that this perception is not always in line with reality:

> Drake: Girls always send [nude] pictures with their face visible on it, so everyone knows who she is. But with boys, they usually send a picture like this [points at his genitals], so even when it comes out, it's not a problem because no one will know who he is.
>
> Moderator: But what happens to the reputation of a boy when he sends those [dickpics]?
>
> Drake: Nothing!
>
> Jessica: Because boys keep it within their own friend group and they are like "Oh, you did that, how cool!"
>
> Drake: No, boys do not keep it within their friend groups…Most of the boys won't even tell their friends something like 'I sent a dickpic to a girl'. No boy will ever do that.
>
> Jessica: At our school, there are boys who admit it. They are like 'Yeah, we do that sometimes, for the fun'.
>
> Drake: At my school, one of the boys quit school because his dickpic in front of the mirror was being circulated…That was really bad, everyone was laughing at him…With boys, it is immediately like 'Oh, what a small one [referring to his genitals]!'… They push you, laugh at you, and bully you.

Although the general assumption is that boys do not have to deal with severe consequences when sharing intimate pictures in the same way that girls do, this conversation shows that boys are also subjected to peer pressure and harassment, particularly by their male peers who judge them for their physical appearances (i.e. their genitals). Drake mentioning the difference in peer pressure and the rather physical nature of the harassment implies the presence of a hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt 2000, 2018; Garcia-Gomez 2019a) within digital youth cultures.

When negotiating intimacy, boys have to negotiate the dominant understanding of masculinity. This implies the interpretation and application of available masculine resources, such as bullying, fighting, and engaging in sexuality in order to present the intimate (moral) self as 'manly' (Presser 2005; Messerschmidt 2000). Young boys are therefore concerned about their intimate self-presentations, not so much because of the risk of gaining a reputation as immoral, but rather because of the risk of gaining a reputation as being "unmanly" among their peers. This may shape their understanding of sexual intimacy online as they are expected to show more manly ways of engaging with intimacy, such as the sending and circulating of intimate pictures without consent and the criticizing of peers in more harsh and physical ways. Young girls, by contrast, perceive both the sending and the receiving of intimate pictures as morally inappropriate. However, the often non-consensual reception of intimate content was not questioned much by the girls in our groups. They consider it their own responsibility to block the boys and delete their pictures because they are convinced that boys are held to a lower moral standard in their social media intimacies.

Intersecting intimate identities: gender, ethnicity, and religiosity

Cultural norms and values are often related to social, gendered, ethnic, and religious values and norms shared by the members of a specific cultural group (Brett 2000). These norms and values affect the online social dynamics in peer groups by defining what is (in)appropriate behavior and provide a context for interpreting certain moral situations and the behaviors of others (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Moreover, axes of power, such as gender, ethnicity, and religiosity, and the intersections between them play a role in youths' intimacy negotiations (Woodward 2015). Although the moral negotiations of young people on intimacy and sexuality have been extensively studied from a gender perspective, our analysis highlights how the intersection of gender with ethnicity and religiosity can affect youths' negotiation processes. During the discussions in our groups with high ethnic–cultural diversity, we noticed that cultural moral understandings of sexual intimacy were negotiated using both religious and ethnic–cultural frames:

Hasan (16): I don't even open those, I just block them [sexy selfies/nudes].

Moderator: Why?

Deniz (13): You can lose your *namus* [honor], you know?

Ali (15): No, no, it doesn't have anything to do with that. What are you planning to achieve by sending those pictures to others? You'll achieve nothing, but other people will have your [intimate] pictures. That is so shameful…If you want to do something [intimate/sexual], you don't have to send a picture, just go see that person in real life. Because then no one will have any evidence…Just go on a date with that person. Then you can do whatever you want to do.

Hasan (16): That is not true.

Ali (16): It still is better than sending pictures, right?

Hasan (16): No, my friend, that is not true. You are saying that you can do whatever you want… But, discipline is important….I believe that everyone has to keep themselves under control.

This conversation between Ali and Hasan shows how the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religiosity can result in different moral understandings of sexual intimacy. Although these boys share several identity aspects that might affect their moral negotiation process, such as the same gender, the same Turkish ethnicity, and participation in the same peer culture and youth organization, their negotiation of morally appropriate sexual intimacy is not the same. Sexual

self-representations online are not only perceived as useless acts of intimacy by these boys, they are also interpreted as evidence of 'shameful' behavior. This particular belief that good moral behavior comes from a desire to avoid shame is characteristic of the cultural logic of honor cultures. Moreover, members of honor cultures are more worried about maintaining their good reputation. This often translates into concern regarding the opinions of their peers, which makes them more likely to behave in accordance with the dominant moral frames of their own cultural groups (Uskul et al. 2019). As the Turkish culture can be seen as an honor culture (Sev'er and Yurdakul 2001), both boys were concerned about not behaving shamefully. The importance of avoiding shame was affected by their ethnic–cultural understanding of morality. Yet, we can clearly see that Ali's stance on sexual intimacy is less strict than Hasan's. Whereas Ali is more concerned with maintaining a good reputation and avoiding shameful situations online, rather than offline, Hasan is convinced that behaving morally is a matter of discipline — both online and offline. This difference in negotiation could be attributed to Hasan's strong religious beliefs, which he had identified earlier in the group conversation. He not only mentioned the importance of having religious moral frames, he also understood being honorable as having the discipline to protect one's intimate moral self from becoming sexually impure. Unlike Ali's, Hasan's negotiation process is affected by the intersection of both ethnic–cultural and religious moral understandings. This makes him intrinsically motivated to avoid intimate situations, even though experiencing and experimenting with intimacy online is indicative of digital youth cultures. Ali, on the other hand, is negotiating his understanding of an intimate moral self in relation to his peers and their opinions about him. He is more concerned about his peers liking him and acknowledging him as a good person, verifying the importance of being honorable within his own (cultural) peer group. Portraying intimacy in itself is, according to Ali, not considered problematic; he even advocates for experiencing intimacy as long as it takes place offline. Experiencing sexual intimacy online, however, is seen as an evidence of a moral failure. This is due to his specific understanding of online intimacy being more visible. Social media, such as Instagram and Snapchat, are centered around visual content, making it possible to visually confirm and recognize the identity of the person sharing the content. That is why self-representations need to be understood as an affirmation of the self as it would be seen by others (Lyon 2018; Woodward 2015). This understanding was commonly accepted by the young boys in our groups because intimate self-representations online often carry the risk of becoming visible and therefore open them up to being judged by their peers for being a 'pervert', 'dirty player', and 'prick', thus harming both their self-worth and their moral value among their peers.

However, moral negotiations on intimate and sexual self-representations online are not only culturally influenced, they are also gendered, so they contain different moral codes according to gender. For girls, this means that they are expected to portray themselves in a sexually pure, invisible, and chaste way (Uskul et al. 2019). Their intimacies/sexualities on social media are often judged within the moral frame of "female innocence," referring to the belief that girls' bodies should remain pure and innocent (Ringrose and Renold 2012). This moral frame is dominant within several cultural groups and was also strongly present among the young girls in all of our groups, regardless of their ethnic–cultural background. The sharing of sexy selfies through social media in particular was negotiated as an immoral thing to do. It was often associated with 'making yourself dirty' and 'giving yourself a bad image' (Jessica, 16). Defining the online display of intimacy as something that will lead to a bad reputation strengthens their belief that it will harm the (sexual) purity of a girl. Moreover, this internalization of the female innocence frame makes sharing and asking for intimate self-representations incomprehensible to their peers, both boys and girls:

Arya (15): Yeah, [I was talking to a boy] and he was asking me if I had a nice booty. I said: 'Why would I describe my body when I'm wearing this [headscarf]?'

Although Arya and Jessica are both convinced that the intimate moral self of young girls is often performed in terms of purity, innocence, and chastity, Arya's negotiation process differs. While Jessica's interpretation is more affected by her gender in relation to the visibility made possible by social media culture, Arya's understanding is more affected by the intersection of her gender with her religious identity. Her headscarf, which she interprets as a symbol of (sexual) chastity and invisibility, guides her negotiations on intimate self-representations online. During the group conversations, she regularly interpreted discussions on sexual intimacy from a religious perspective, making it clear that her religious identity shapes her moral understandings of gender, culture, and intimacy. Even though she describes herself as a social person and enjoys chatting with other peers, engaging in visual intimacy both online and offline seems immoral to her as it contradicts her religious clothing. However, it is interesting to note that the moral reputation of young girls, even in a postfeminist digital context (Dobson 2015), revolves around conservative and sexist understandings of sexual purity. For young girls, gender seems to be more decisive than other identity axes in their moral negotiation process. This became clear in the conversation between Jessica and Arya, who are both young girls participating in the same youth organization. Even though their ethnicities are different — Jessica is ethnically Belgian and Arya is ethnically Turkish — their negotiations were very similar and contained gendered understandings of purity. Yet, Arya's beliefs were strengthened by the intersection of her ethnic and religious identities as she expressed multiple times that she was a religious person and explained her thought processes from a religious perspective, whereas Jessica did not mention anything about her religious stance.

Furthermore, this particular understanding that young people have of visual social media not only shapes their social interactions and gives meaning to their intimacy online (Hepp 2012), but is also indicative of the social media cultures present within digital youth cultures. Social media cultures only differ according to the specific social media application, but they also socially and culturally organize intimacy in different ways. Looking at the two most frequently mentioned social media in our groups — Instagram and Snapchat — there was a clear difference between young people's understandings of both applications. Although Instagram and Snapchat have a lot of features in common, young people still differentiate between their affordances, resulting in different social media cultures. Whereas Instagram was negotiated as a more 'public' (Lara, 14) and 'decent' (Debby, 17) social medium, through which the sharing of (overly) intimate self-representations was discouraged, Snapchat was generally perceived as a low-key, friend-oriented social medium creating a 'safer' (Amir, 15) space in which youngsters feel more comfortable with sharing intimate self-representations, particularly because it makes fast and ephemeral self-presentations possible, despite the likelihood of them being screenshotted by peers (Handyside and Ringrose 2017). This increased presence of social media in the everyday life of young people therefore affects the social and cultural organization of (sexual) intimacy by shaping the way intimate self-representations are produced and shared with peers (Longhurst, 2007; De Ridder, 2014).

DISCUSSION

This study's aim was to gain insight into the moral negotiation processes of young people in relation to mediated sexual intimacy. Although sharing self-representations online is considered an empowering means of self-expression, social media are still heavily peer controlled and normative discursive spaces where moral negotiations on gender, culture, and sexual intimacy occur. These negotiations are shaped by the dynamics of peer culture and social media culture in general. While social media culture influences how young people represent their intimate selves visually, peer cultures provide a base from which to morally understand and negotiate those self-representations. However, these peer cultures are diverse in their moral understandings. With this study, we tried to highlight this diversity in terms of gender, ethnic–

cultural identity, and religiosity by paying particular attention to the diversity among youth, both in our data collection and our analysis.

Gendered moral negotiations

Earlier studies have already shown that moral negotiations are indeed affected by gendered dynamics: the bodies of young girls in particular are extremely visible, embodying both empowering and sexist discourses on sexual intimacy. Our study is in line with previous research and shows that even in postfeminist contexts, young girls are cautious about presenting their intimate selves on social media, as their sexual and intimate experiences and portrayals are still directly linked to their moral reputation. However, our analysis shows that to avoid gaining a bad reputation or being labeled as immoral by their peers, both young girls and boys often choose to be sexually invisible online. Representations of (sexual) intimacy are often lacking on their social media profiles because every representation or online act of sexual intimacy is generally interpreted as dirty, immoral, and unsafe. Yet, the interpretation of immorality is heavily gendered and has different meanings and consequences for boys and girls. Young girls are often slutshamed and criticized for their capacities to think, behave, and act morally, whereas boys are judged by their physical appearances (i.e., of their genitals) and whether they conform to the hegemonic masculinity ideals within their peer groups. For boys, having a good reputation often means that they have to be seen as being "man" enough, both online and offline. The experiences of young boys are often overlooked as their bodies are less sexualized and victimized in public discourses, yet our analysis suggests that that they are also very conscious and critical of their sexual and intimate practices online, especially because the consequences of having an immoral or bad reputation include not only encountering (sexual) harassment, such as gossip and exclusion, but for young boys, these consequences can also include facing physical judgment and harassment from their peers.

Ethnic–cultural and religious moral negotiations

The moral negotiations of young people on sexual intimacy have been extensively studied from a gender perspective, yet our analysis highlights how the intersection of gender with ethnicity and religiosity can affect this negotiation process. Earlier studies are mainly based on more homogeneous groups of young people in terms of gender, ethnic background, and sexuality. Although these result in very valuable findings on youth, sexuality, and social media, they do not reflect the diversity within contemporary digital youth cultures. The interactions between the diverse groups of youth and how these interactions affect various moral negotiations are often overlooked. Young people sharing the same gendered or ethnic–cultural identity do not necessarily share the same negotiation process. Nevertheless, these differences should not be seen from an essentialist view on diversity, as their moral understandings of intimacy are often similar. Yet, their processes of negotiating these moral understandings can be different.

With this study, we tried to include a diverse group of youngsters with different gender identities and from different ethnic–cultural backgrounds to capture how the intersection of youth's multiple identity axes affects their moral negotiations on mediated sexual intimacy. Our analysis shows that interpretations of sexual morality vary according to gender and ethnicity, but more specifically, they are highly affected by cultural and religious beliefs. The negotiation processes of the youngsters in our groups with an ethnic Belgian background were generally based on the intersection of gender and culture. More specifically, sexual morality was often interpreted in terms of young girls and their bodies. The embodiment of the ideal of female innocence, which is a dominant moral understanding in Western cultures like Belgium's, was a frequently used frame to negotiate the sexual and intimate experiences of young girls. This ideal refers to the belief that girls have to be sexually modest, pure, and innocent in order to be

seen as moral. This is particularly evident on online platforms, whereas intimacy offline was in some cases encouraged as it can be less visible to others. Although this cultural belief was also noticeable in the negotiation processes of the youngsters from diverse ethnic–cultural backgrounds, their understandings were mainly coming from a religious perspective. Religiosity, as a relevant dimension of ethnicity, seemed to be a decisive factor in negotiating sexual morality. Interestingly, the ideal of sexual purity and morality was less gendered in the religious beliefs of our youngsters, as they were convinced that both boys and girls have to adjust to that ideal online and also offline. Sexual morality was interpreted in terms of self-discipline and the physical embodiment of modesty. The religious youngsters in our groups believed that sexual morality implied the disciplining of one's sexual and intimate expressions, in which morality was embodied by modesty and the invisibility of sexual/intimate bodies and practices.

Hence, examining the intersection of several aspects of identity is crucial to understanding the thought processes of young people regarding mediated sexual intimacy. We already knew that there are sexual double standards circulating in social media cultures implying the existence of normative sexual moralities, yet our study shows how these sexual moralities are negotiated and affected by several identity axes such as gender, ethnic–cultural background, and religiosity.

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