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Confessing sex in online student communities

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine Facebook “Confessions” sites associated with two large universities (one North American and one South African) to investigate the ways in which students interactionally negotiate normativity in discussions initiated by confessions relating to sex. The research is grounded in a Foucauldian framework that emphasizes the centrality of sex and sexuality. Our findings focus on two interrelated aspects of the data. The first concerns the features of the initial (anonymous) confessional posts, and the second relates to subsequent comments on the initial post. Close examination of initial posts offers insights into participants’ orientations to sexual acts, situations and beliefs that are treated as either normative or transgressive. Subsequent comments posted by participants reveal ways in which the “confessability” of confessions is interactionally ratified or contested. The findings thus demonstrate some ways in which normative sexuality is (re)produced, ratified, and contested within student online communities.

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1. Introduction

University students have increasing access to computers, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other forms of online communities (Chen and Peng, 2008; Madge et al., 2009), and it has therefore become relevant to examine the interactions that take place in such contexts. Given the centrality of sex and sexuality for the human experience (Hawkes, 1996; Rubin, 1984), it is particularly important to examine the ways in which sex is taken up as a topic of discussion in these online communities. The university student years are a time when many young adults engage in the negotiation, development, and management of orientations to sex and sexuality. Previous research has examined sex-related phenomena including sex as a characteristic of risky behavior (see, e.g., Lindgren et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2011), the practice of casual sex (see, e.g., Grello et al., 2006; Paul and Hayes, 2002) and sexual relationships between students and academic staff (see, e.g., Richards et al., 2014; Taylor, 2011). However, less is known about how students discuss and negotiate matters of sexual behavior in naturally occurring interactions, particularly in online communities.

This paper examines two online student communities in the form of Facebook “Confessions” sites associated with two large universities, in order to investigate some ways in which students

engage in online discussions of sexual behavior. Facebook’s origins are grounded in college culture (Goggin, 2014) and the use of Facebook among university students continues to be pervasive, making Facebook interactions useful settings for examining naturally occurring interactions in which students engage with various issues of relevance to them (Stokoe et al., 2013). More specifically, university-related “Confessions” sites provide “confessional spaces” where initial posters can (anonymously) submit a post revealing any aspect of their actions, lives, experiences, or beliefs as students at that university, and other participants can subsequently engage with the initial submission by posting their commentary on it and/or by responding to responses produced by others. A close examination of these settings thus allows for the examination of how students interactionally engage with and negotiate matters pertaining to sex.

2. Foucault, confession and sexuality

The present study takes as its point of departure a Foucauldian framework that emphasizes the centrality of sex and sexuality in modern society. This framework also emphasizes the salience of sex and sexuality as objects of scientific study. Within the Foucauldian tradition, sexuality is both an instrument and effect of the rise of the human sciences. In this regard, Weeks’ (2014, p. 7) discussion of Foucault’s view on sex is key:

The fundamental question, as posed by Foucault, is how is it that in Western society since the eighteenth century, sexuality

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has come to be seen not just as a means of biological reproduction nor a source of harmless pleasure, but, on the contrary, as the central part of our being, the privileged site in which ‘the truth of being’ is to be found.

Given that sex occupies a prominent position in contemporary society that extends beyond reproduction and pleasure, it is important to examine discourses of sex, since they are considered centrally defining markers for human subjectivity, identity and selfhood in modern life.

In contrast to the view that sex was silenced during the eighteenth century, Foucault argues that there was a gradual accumulation and multiplication of *coded* sexual discourses that referred specifically to both the objects and practices of sexuality. These coded discourses gradually acquired re-coded procedures of transmission (Foucault, 1990). Although making reference to sex in polite company was met with disapproval, its *coding* and *recoding* were required in certain spheres of life. Sex as a discursive object came to be incessantly produced and reproduced through its study by medicine, psychiatry, and the law. The church also played a role in the production and reproduction of sex as a discourse. Sex as a discourse was thus multiplied, refined, and elaborated.

According to Foucault (1990), the places and ways in which we have come to talk about sex, although rooted in the Catholic confessional, with its emphasis on the absolution of sin contingent on the routinized declarations of contrition by the confessor, have been secularized. Confessional practices involving sex and sexuality in modern life take a variety of forms and registers in different spheres, including “justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations [and] in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life” (Foucault, 1990, p. 59). Moreover, new communication technologies have ushered in unprecedented possibilities for shifting confessional conventions. In particular, and as our analysis demonstrates, Social Networking Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook serve as platforms for new anonymous communities that can act as confessional relays for talk about sex (Sauter, 2014), thereby enabling confessional practices that differ markedly from those described in Foucault’s historical reading of religious and medico-legal practices.

Despite these changes in the potential repertoire, register and technological architecture of confessional practices, confessing sex still provides a set of conditions by which sexuality can be produced, regulated and contested. That is, confessing about sex provides others access to otherwise private, often secret exchanges between self and/or others. Each act of confession becomes part of the cumulated range of de facto possibilities for human sexuality. It is against or within this confessional repertoire that confessors are incited to confess. Every confession thus represents a new possibility against which normative sexuality can be redefined, reasserted and reproduced. The net effect of this is the multiplication of discourses on sex and recursive incitements to speak about it (Foucault, 1990). This incitement to detailed speech about sex gradually formed the modern mechanism through which acts of sex were deeply implicated in questions of the self, becoming central to the way that individuals understood and defined themselves and others. Thus, through the incitement to speak, sexual acts and subjectivity were fused to produce modern human sexuality. As a result, we have inherited a set of definitions of selfhood, subjectivity and identity in which sexuality is privileged.

While Foucault’s genealogical analysis provides an account of the historical emergence of discourses of sex and sexuality as a central feature of modern society, thereby providing a backdrop to the examination of contemporary confessional practices relating to sex, our study contrasts with his approach by examining *how* his thesis is useful for understanding the way that such practices are carried out and responded to in situated interactional settings,

and thus how these discourses are (re)produced and contested *in situ* at particular moments in time. In addition, the online platform on which the confessions we examine are posted differs from the types of confessional authorities Foucault wrote about, since the participants are “confessing” to an audience of fellow students rather than to a single representative of a religious or medico-legal institution, thus allowing for an examination of how online technologies may provide distinctive new settings for the production of confessional acts. In light of this, we turn next to a brief discussion of existing research examining sexuality in online settings.

3. Sexuality in online communities

The development of the internet in the latter part of the 20th century led to greater accessibility to sexual content and sex related conversations and interactions (Sorbring et al., 2015). Particularly relevant for the purposes of our study are the ways in which online communities have provided a space for young people to engage in discussions about sex and explore emerging sexuality (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004). They provide a platform for adult-to-adult and adult-to-child sexual interactions (Bergen et al., 2015), discussions pertaining to female sexual problems (Hucker and McCabe, 2015) and interactions relating to sexual health (Mustanski et al., 2015). Young adults, and university students in particular, increasingly utilize online networking sites such as Facebook as platforms to engage in sex related discussions, with approximately a quarter of young adults including sexual references on their profiles (Moreno et al., 2009). Facebook can also be used to engage in voyeurism (Martínez-Alemán and Wartman, 2009) and to produce and resist normative gender and sexuality (De Ridder and Bauwel, 2013).

Research examining online settings has also suggested that users’ ability to post anonymously may facilitate the construction of identities and production of actions that may be more difficult for participants to perform in face-to-face or non-anonymous settings (see, e.g., Christopherson, 2007), including providing sites for the production of sexual confessions that may otherwise remain hidden or private (Schoenebeck, 2013). Consistent with this suggestion, Pitcher’s (2016) study of students’ posts to a social networking mobile application identifies sexual confessions as a prominent feature of the content of these posts, and describes a range of confessions of sexual practices and desires included in the posts, which together (and following a similar Foucauldian framework to our own) serve to produce normative discourses and subjectivities with respect to sex and sexuality. Pitcher’s (2016) study, however, focuses explicitly on the content of confessional posts, in contrast to our focus on both the content of the posts and the social practices through which such posts are produced and responded to. Thus, our study offers what is to our knowledge the first available fine-grained examination of the ways in which participants collaboratively produce, ratify and contest sexual confessions in online settings.

4. Method and data

Two university-related Facebook “Confessions” sites were selected for the study—one based in North America and the other in South Africa. According to the descriptions provided on the sites, they intend to provide students of the university with which they are associated opportunities to anonymously post confessions, with the North American site being described as a space where students can “spill all [their] confessions anonymously” and the South African site described as a “place for the students to share in [sic] their experiences. The page relies heavily on students sending in their confessions.” The anonymity of the posts submitted to the

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