

"For the moment, I am not F*cking," I am Tweeting: Platforms of / as Sexuality

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Jacob Johanssen,

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Abstract: This article develops the argument that digital platforms are significantly infused with originary (and unconscious) residues of the sexual. Drawing on Laplanchean conceptualizations of sexuality, I argue that the digital has always been sexual(ised) in itself – a process that precedes and exceeds the erotic or pornographic. For Laplanche, sexuality is constitutive of the human subject as such. Infantile sexuality is shaped and transformed in an enigmatic relation with the caregiver. Drawing on this model as an analogy, I claim that users are drawn to platforms because they (unconsciously) desire to return to infantile sexuality and a holding environment but are disciplined and policed by platforms into adopting modes of adult sexuality that are shaped by ideology and the social. Platforms resemble a child – caregiver relation that is further complicated by other users who, from the perspective of the individual user, occupy the position of siblings. The user – sibling relation is marked by competition as well as moments of care and cooperation. As users work, chat, share, like, and practically live online and via networked objects, their forms of usage mimic, or come close to, the sensual-affective rhythms of sexuality itself.

Jacob JOHANSEN

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Introduction

In the film *Marriage Story* (2019, dir. Noah Baumbach), the protagonist Nicole remarks to her family lawyer Nora, who handles her divorce: "And it was better than sex, the talking. Although the sex was also like the talking, everything is like everything in a relationship, do you find that?" The scene suggests that talking and sexual intercourse seem to be curiously intermingled or similar. Perhaps Noah Baumbach read Lacan, as a similar sentiment is raised in psychoanalysis. The Lacanian philosopher Alenka Zupančič begins her book *What IS Sex?* with a quote from Lacan's Seminar XI: "In other words—for the moment, I am not fucking, I am talking to you. Well! I can have exactly the same satisfaction as if I were fucking" (Lacan 165). Lacan goes as far as to say that talking and sexual activity are interchangeable: As he is talking, giving his seminar, he asks whether that very act "raises the question of whether in fact I am not fucking at this moment" (Lacan 166). "The point is that the satisfaction in talking is itself 'sexual'" (Zupančič 1). In that sense, one might be tempted to regard the ubiquitous (and maybe even pathological) use of digital platforms¹ by subjects today as mere acts of sublimation whereby unconscious fantasies, symptoms or drives are creatively transformed into other activities. This would tally with discussions in the media of a decline of sexual intercourse across many parts of the world, a 'sex recession', the rise of 'performance anxiety' in young men, etc. Yet, such an argument would reduce platform use to sublimation. While sublimation may undoubtedly play a part in the use of platforms for some, I claim that platforms dis-satisfy human subjectivity on a more fundamental and originary level. At the same time, Lacan's equation of sexuality with *something* else, in his case talking, is useful to hold on to. It, as Zupančič has shown, opens up an ontological perspective on sexuality that regards it as constitutive of the subject, enjoyment, and other actions such as talking, or using platforms. Drawing on Zupančič, analysing platform use would then reveal something about the enjoyment and vicissitudes of sexuality itself.

In this article, I mainly focus on commercial social media platforms, but the arguments are applicable to any platform that brings users together to enable communication. I unfold the thesis that social media mimic or come close to the practices of sexuality itself. Both metaphorically and ontologically speaking, users are drawn to platforms because they (unconsciously) desire to return to infantile sexuality and a holding environment but are disciplined and policed by platforms into adopting modes of adult sexuality that are shaped by ideology and the social. We could also describe this transformation as a movement from pre- to post-oedipal modes of psychosexuality (see Johanssen & Krüger for a detailed discussion). Platforms resemble a child – caregiver relation that is further complicated by other users who, from the perspective of the individual user, occupy the position of siblings. Before presenting these arguments, I introduce Jean Laplanche's conceptualisation of sexuality and contrast it with that of Lacan.

Psychoanalysis and Sexuality: Lacan and Laplanche

Jean Laplanche is one of the few psychoanalysts who stressed the erotic and unconscious dynamics of sexuality within the mother-infant relationship and early psychosexual development of the infant ("The theory of seduction and the problem of the other"). For him, the subject is formed in relation to an otherness that is erotically charged; for instance, in the case of the breast (*Seduction, Translation, Drives*). It is the breast that is both an erogenous zone and a means of nourishing the baby for the mother. As Sharon Tugwell writes, "[for] Laplanche, it is precisely *because* the mother is a desiring social *subject* that the child's rudimentary sexuality and subjectivity can come into being" (Tugwell 169, italics in original). Yet, the dynamics between infant and caregiver(s) are also characterised by holding and containing elements.

For Laplanche, the unconscious forms as the infant is confronted with adult caregivers, who themselves act out of unconscious desires, motivations, fantasies, etc. There is an asymmetry between the child and caregiver as the young infant is confronted with the, what he called, 'enigmatic signifier'. Unlike Lacan, who sees the formation of subjectivity through the (flawed) entry into the Symbolic Order, Laplanche developed a theory of subject formation which begins in early infancy. He wrote:

¹ I use the term 'platforms' as an umbrella term for commercial entities to include social media, like Twitter or Instagram, as well as apps such as Uber, ecommerce platforms like Amazon, or streaming platforms like Spotify. While they may have varying ways of making profit, all depend on user data as a business model.

To address someone with no shared interpretive system, in a mainly extraverbal manner: such is the function of adult messages, of those signifiers which I claim are simultaneously and indissociably enigmatic and sexual, in so far as they are not transparent to themselves, but compromised by the adult's relation to their own unconscious. (*Essays on Otherness* 79-80)

The enigmatic signifiers, or *messages* to be more precise, are repressed and form the unconscious, according to Laplanche. Those utterances, gestures, behaviours which remain incomprehensible or untranslatable for the child constitute the enigmatic signifiers. They likewise remain enigmatic to the caregiver (the mother in particular). For Laplanche, as for Lacan, sexuality is always Other and alien to the subject. It is formed because the enigmatic messages remain as residues. They can never be fully decoded or deciphered and they are also enigmatic for the adults who (unwittingly) produce them. This conceptualisation is not too different to how Lacan conceived of communication as a process that is always somewhat alienated in itself. With Lacan, we could define the enigmatic as consisting of a Real kernel that remains unassimilable. For Laplanche, as for Lacan, human subjectivity is subsequently characterised by attempts to make sense of the (enigmatic) Other. The enigmatic residues within the subject create both the unconscious, as already noted, and sexuality as such. Laplanche can be seen as a useful supplement to Lacan here, because he stresses that sexuality comes into being as a result of the actual infant-caregiver relationship that bears (unconscious) sexual traces through and through. "Attachment, then, is *both* sexuality's condition of possibility *and* the medium through which the parent's radical otherness morphs libidinal development" (Saketopoulou 261, italics in original), Saketopoulou notes in the context of the psychosexual development of the infant.

For Laplanche, pre-genital infantile sexuality, or what he called '*le sexual*' ("Gender, Sex, and the Sexual" 201), 'remains outside and in excess of gender' (Stein 191). Again, we can see some parallels with Lacan here, but for the latter sexuality is always part of the Symbolic as a particular contradiction. There is no originary sexuality for Lacan. For Laplanche, infantile sexuality is originary and less regulated by the Symbolic. Laplanche developed a threefold model of the ontology of sexuality, which we can summarise as: *Le sexual – sex – gender*. As Ruth Stein explained:

In the last resort, what remains un-normalized is infantile sexuality, and the critical axis for Laplanche remains the faultline between "adult" and "infantile" sexuality, rather than between sexual identity and gender identity or between sex and gender (Stein 192).

The above opens up a perspective on sexuality as ontology that sees gender as pluralist but also regulated by the biology of sex. At the same time, gender precedes sex and in itself bears upon sex. For the infant, gender comes first in being (un)consciously made aware of it by caregivers and the social. Laplanche argues that "nothing allows us to state that biological sex is intimately perceived, apprehended, and experienced in any fashion, in the earliest months, by the subject" ("Gender, Sex, and the Sexual" 212). "Gender is acquired, assigned, but enigmatic up to about fifteen months. Sex comes along to fix, to translate gender in the course of the second year" ("Gender, Sex, and the Sexual" 216).

To sum up, for Laplanche infantile sexuality is "the residue of, the repression of gender by sexuality, that is what remains inarticulate after gender has been organized by the sexuality of sexual difference." (Stein 195). Or as he writes: "The sexual is the unconscious residue of the repression/symbolization of gender by sex" ("Gender, Sex, and the Sexual" 202). Even though it is repressed, infantile sexuality never completely vanishes from the subject. This last point is particularly important for the argument of this article because I argue that platform use both (unconsciously) responds to the ontology of sexuality *and* mimics sexual practices themselves. I develop both arguments in turn. They are structural and immanent in nature. Before going into detail, a brief review of psychoanalytic scholarship on the digital is useful.

Psychoanalysis and Platforms

A number of thinkers have taken up Lacanian notions to think about the internet. The early works of Slavoj Žižek on cyberspace and its relationship to fantasy, the Other and the subject (*The Indivisible Remainder*; *The Plague of Fantasies*; "Cyberspace") were important here and the field of psychoanalytic media or internet studies (Johanssen; Johanssen & Krüger) has seen considerable growth over the last years. Other notable work in this area has also focussed on social media (Dean; Horbury; Krüger; Semerene; Beresheim; Hodge; Flisfeder; Rambatan & Johanssen). While Lacan may be popular as a conceptual backdrop, scholars have also drawn on object-relations theory (Balick; MacRury & Yates), Freud (Johanssen), Jung (Singh), or depth-hermeneutics (Krüger).

Jodi Dean's influential book *Blog Theory* presented the argument that blogs and the early social media platforms of the 2000s were another example of declining Symbolic efficiency. They are shaped by the logic of the drive: content is posted for the sake of posting content, users endlessly share, like or comment on each other's posts without real goals or commitment. The habitual and repetitive nature of activity in digital networks produces *jouissance*.

Matthew Flisfeder has argued that social media has become *the* metaphor for wider neoliberal capitalism's operation. For him, in contrast to Dean, social media enable a strengthened belief in the big Other. Using social media satisfies "the desire of the Other in the form of likes, shares, comments, follows, and so forth" (Flisfeder 67). I agree with Flisfeder's position that social media needs to be seen in relation to desire rather than drive. At the same time, I wish to think about the characteristics of social media (and digital platforms in general) in terms of its structural dimensions and immanent usage dynamics. This means expanding the Lacanian focus on desire and enjoyment to consider platforms in a different manner.

Sharon Tugwell has recently discussed the subject's relationship to the smartphone by drawing on Laplanche. The close relationship the subject has with the smartphone resembles the rhythms of sexuality itself and is underlined by an erotic tension. Yet, this erotic relationship always remains somewhat enigmatic. Drawing on Tugwell, I wish to continue this line of argument by taking into account that platforms connect users, or workers and clients in some cases. Tugwell conceptualises the user – device or user – platform relationship as one that is akin to the infant – caregiver relationship. I wish to extend this argument. Often, platforms work in a threefold manner e.g. by connecting clients and drivers (Uber), or users with other users (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) while being a distinct part of that relationship. Platforms "are digital infrastructures that enable two or more people to connect" (Srnicek 43).

It is the user-generated content and the ability to connect with other users, for instance on social media, that make platforms so significant. Tugwell's argument is highly convincing, in my view, that platforms and networked devices mimic the rhythms of sexuality and by extension the unconscious itself. Yet, social media platforms in particular could be described as follows: user – platform – user. They act as a mediator between users and constitute a triad rather than a user – platform dyad that Tugwell discusses, although such dyadic relationships of course take place very often as well. She, for instance, conceptualizes the user – smartphone relationship as one in which the user (caregiver) looks after the baby (phone), responds to its every nudge, beep or flash with instant attention and care. Yet, as she notes, we could also see the relationship in reverse: where we are being cared for and disciplined by our phone-mothers. Indeed, "what seems to take place in user-device interactions is a dance between two polarities, perhaps leading to a new position entirely" (Tugwell 176). In that sense, we can take up both positions in different moments of the pre- or post-oedipal (Johanssen & Krüger). As I go on to discuss, this argument does not quite hold up in relation to commercial platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook. Users are in a position of relative powerlessness compared to the platforms themselves.

Residues of the Future: Platforms of Sexuality

A Laplanchean perspective on platforms then leads us to conceptualise platform use as consisting of residues that are nonetheless always animated by a kind of futurity. Platform use is very much animated by an (unconscious) Lacanian desire to see *what might happen next*: who will like my tweet? How many new friend requests will I receive? What is there for me to see, like, or comment on? While such dynamics, as Flisfeder has shown, can be convincingly conceptualised through a Lacanian prism, there is a kind of originality or originary character to them that can be unpacked further with Laplanche. Platforms enable complex psychodynamics between subjects and objects. I argue that the usage of platforms is, ultimately, enigmatic and responds to something enigmatic that is not (only) about the Lacanian drive, desire, *objet a*, or Other. Platforms tap into the enigmatic signifier and suggest to the user that in using them, more can be discovered about the enigmatic core of their subjectivity. Yet, ultimately this promise always falls short and keeps subjects hooked. It does not relate to a lost object, or a void that is covered over with an object that was never there (the Lacanian *objet a*) but a fundamental incomprehensibility and untranslatability of the enigmatic signifier of the infantile subject's relationship to caregivers and the social.

We could argue that platform use represents an unconscious regressive desire to return to early infancy. It is infantile sexuality that (unconsciously) animates or motivates users to join and use platforms in the first place. As Balick has argued, social media can also be seen in this context as enabling a holding and containing environment for subjects. This desire always remains in the background for users, but there is more to the allure of platforms. The dyadic user – platform

relationship is opened up to a triadic one as other users are also part of e.g. Twitter. Drawing on the Laplancheian schema, we can conceptualise platforms and users as follows:

<i>Le sexual</i>	–Sex – Gender	
Child	–	Caregiver – Siblings (not considered by Laplanche)
User	–	Platform – Other users

This makes platforms akin to the quasi-autonomous, biological and yet culturally constructed category of 'sex' that remains in tension with gender. Platforms occupy a particular place in the matrix of users and digital technology. This matrix is conceptualised here from the perspective of the *individual* user who enters into particular relationalities via and with platforms and other users. Like sex, platforms occupy a (fantasmatic) position of a powerful, quasi-natural (quasi-biological entity in the 'digital ecosystem') category or entity that is both super-subjective and intrinsically shapes an individual's (digital) subjectivity. "In many ways, to become a digital subject is to become a subject all over again" (Tugwell 177). As processes of subjectivization beyond platforms are so closely linked to sexuation and the heteronormative *naming* of the subject as a boy or girl (Butler), similar dynamics take place on platforms. It is platforms, and not users, that orchestrate through strict rules, design interfaces and affordances who and what we can become as digital subjects. Those rules, features, etc. are often absolute, untransparent, complex, random and are themselves shaped by actual human beings and capitalism itself. But they come to confront users as bundled into an autonomous object that is the platform. In short, platforms are enigmatic. An enigma that is affirmed, challenged, rebelled against, but ultimately reproduced by the individual user and other users. Platforms thus embody a sexed and gendered m/Other that retains a status of authority. The platform is akin to a fully autonomous being, who is sexed and gendered. A parental caregiver. Platform use is thus initially animated by an unconscious desire for containment by and attachment to the Other, as well as a fascination by their enigmatic dimensions.

This also means that platforms are constructed to embody an ideology of an Other that is able to know our desire better than we could and act on it pre-emptively by giving us what we (think) we need. Platforms *misrecognise* digital subject formations and expressions as being the same as actual subjects behave and think beyond the digital realm. Far from having declined, (illusionary) Symbolic authority is only strengthened by contemporary technology (see also Flisfeder). Platforms occupy a distinctly perverse logic in so far as they reward and punish users through acts of commodification, surveillance and tracking, yet also provide highly functioning and attractive interfaces that enable feelings of care, love and mutuality to be present (Johanssen).

In this scenario, the individual user embodies a position of (regression to) infantile sexuality which seeks to make sense of both the platform and other users. In this matrix, it is both the Other (platform) and other users that can provide (sexual) recognition to the user. To be seen and recognised is a desire to decipher the enigmatic signifier (Laplanche) and to cover over the sexual non-relation (Lacan). Those forms of recognition are sexual in their ontology.

It is therefore no coincidence that the immanent use patterns and dynamics resemble or mimic sexual practices and fantasies themselves, as I discuss below.

Platforms as Sexuality

The user occupies (or regresses to) a position of infantile sexuality because it is their unconscious and whole being, rather than sexuality proper (genital sexuality, practices, fantasies etc.) that animate the particular ways that social media is used, the frequency of posting, the types of posts that seek to attract maximum attention, and so on. For Laplanche, "[s]exual excitement originates in the gap between maternal excess and what the infant's ego can bind; *the misalignment between the two is riveting*" (Saketopoulou 261, italics in original). The sexual dynamics of social media, and many other platforms, originate at a similar gap between other users, platform excess and what the individual user can bind: being continuously left in a strange state of dis-satisfaction, of somewhat but not quite satisfied, is riveting (Johanssen; Flisfeder). Such dynamics are demanded and established by platforms themselves that signal to the user that they are always there and ready to take in, bind and process their posts, messages, likes, or photos. The cultural is "by definition intrusive, stimulating and sexual" (*Essays on Otherness* 225), argues Laplanche. It is the intrusiveness of platforms that we all know too well about but are actually attracted and stimulated by on an unconscious level.

We can unpack this further by introducing another Laplancheian notion at this point: that of *propping*.² For him (*Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*), drawing on and developing Freud, propping, or *anaclysis*, refers to a (developmental) process of turning an instinct into a drive, or of the drive deviating from vital instinctual processes. Something with clear aims (instincts) turns into something aim- and objectless (drives). The object of need (the breast) is found by the baby in order to provide satisfaction through nourishment. Only subsequently, does the breast become an abstract symbol, an object of fantasy that forms (one of) the foundations of (non-biological) fantasmatic sexuality. Propping, then, is "that leaning of nascent sexuality on nonsexual activities, but the *actual* emergence of sexuality is not yet there" (*Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* 88). The infant is overwhelmed by the Other's (enigmatic) messages, unable "to successfully control or escape this environment, the ego 'turn[s] round upon the self' in an effort to manage the excess by surrendering itself to it" (Ashtor 69). In turning back upon the self, the ego experiences sexuality as something from the outside that has been taken in as "an object reflected within the subject" (*Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* 88, italics in original), as Laplanche puts it. Something alien to the subject has been partially assimilated but there is always something that remains outside. In that sense, contra to Lacan, sexuality is entirely self-generated (Ashtor 70). Yet, this self-generation is only possible through an actual other adult. In *Homo Psyche*, Gila Ashtor has, in a critical discussion of Leo Bersani, noted that for him the infantile experience and 'journey' towards sexuality is masochistic because being confronted with, invaded by, and ultimately taking in, an external world constitutes an auto-erotic, "masochistic thrill" (Bersani 95). This form of masochism, as Nicola Diamond has noted, is accompanied by aggression at the outside world and "anything or anyone who would obstruct the organism's life activities" (Diamond 70). At the same time, the subject acts primitively aggressive against their self in order to gain control over their body. Dynamics of intrusion and assimilation, masochism, auto-eroticism and fantasy are very useful for thinking about the subject's gravitational pull towards social media and platforms in general. The subject arrives, again and again, at social media by embodying the same dynamics and patterns that I have described here. Their use of social media is polymorphous perverse, masochistic and distinctly *sexual* in the Laplancheian sense. "One could say that it is in fact the rhythms and traces of our own unconscious sexuality, given back to us as an otherness that is being transmitted. We are seduced by the return to our own infantile sexuality, facilitated and mediated through hand-held technology" (Tugwell 174). It is the otherness and enigma of infantile sexuality that we find multiplied – and policed – on digital platforms today.

However, this unconscious, embodied mode of using platforms, which we could see as creative, anarchic and unregulated, is continuously shaped, regulated, and (de)formed by platforms who respond to the regressive desire of returning to infantile sexuality by authoritative, parental functions, as just discussed. The user in turn responds in different ways: with a childish insistence on their own narcissistic importance and freedom e.g. by posting long 'complaints' or rants aimed at the platform itself (see Krüger & Johanssen for a detailed discussion); by cynically emphasising their knowledge of being exploited and surveyed; or by taking pleasure in being disciplined by the caregiver and 'doing as they are told', thereby progressing to more 'mature' forms of sexuality. This form of adult sexuality is phallic and precisely violates or betrays the pre-genital form of infantile sexuality by embodying a sexuality that is tied to particular erogenous zones, fantasies, ideas of what constitutes pleasure, etc. As Diego Semerene writes about platforms and online culture:

As excitation in digital culture becomes perpetually priapic – the ideal user is the user who is never not excited – it further becomes obvious that the penis can't keep up with its phallic expectations. So many lovers nursing a floppy dick after making the most phallic of promises; so many lovers dead on arrival, us wishing their next iteration could begin before the current one has had a chance to disappoint us any further. So many lovers logging on to hook-up apps immediately after, or even before, bidding us goodbye. (Semerene 206)

In its specific rhythms and affective modes of engagement, users of contemporary commercial apps, platforms, devices and technologies are constantly encouraged to and behave themselves in ways that mirror the ontology of sex. In a libidinal online economy that is fundamentally built on increasing and decreasing arousal levels of enjoyment and frustration, subjects are constantly 'online' and 'available'. They expose themselves to others and are similarly hungrily devoured by others who expose themselves in turn. The excessive nature of social media with its never-ending content, narcissistic acts of self-presentation and self-commodification are *sexual* and phallic in their very rhythms, patterns of arousal

² Laplanche subsequently critiqued his own development of propping and replaced it with his 'theory of general seduction' ("The theory of Seduction and the Problem of the Other"), discussing it goes beyond the scope of this article.

and momentary, orgasmic-like states of excitation. Yet, the promise that platforms make can never be delivered and subjects are left chasing the next arousal peak. Using social media often feels distinctly masochistic for subjects because it is through the feeling of dissatisfaction that they gain enjoyment.

Sibling Rivalry and Love

While the user – platform relation is significant, it is only in combination with other users that platforms gain such importance for the subject. As argued elsewhere (Rambatan & Johanssen), the individual user is constantly confronted with other users who seem to be able to be better at aligning their subjectivities with the digital, who get more likes, have more friends, are more desirable, etc. This, from the perspective of the individual user, situates the other users as *siblings* who are envied, competed with or rebelled against in an endless battle of enjoyment and desire to be seen by the Other (see also Flisfeder).

In conceptualising the other users as siblings³, I regard them as being similar but not quite like the individual user. Psychoanalytic literature has often neglected siblings. Neither Freud, nor Lacan or Laplanche paid much attention to them. Coles has argued that sibling relationships, and rivalries in particular, are about both love and hatred. For the early Melanie Klein, siblings play “an essential part in every relationship of love, even, between grown-up people” (Klein 224). In the context of platforms, I do not mean to suggest that siblings are universal or are reproduced as actual (unconscious) sibling relationships. Users come to occupy a position that is metaphorically like that of a sibling in relation to the other individual user. As platforms (metaphorically) discipline the individual user into adult sexuality, users turn to other users in their quest for attention, recognition and communication (Balick). While the usage of platforms undoubtedly is often deeply satisfying, meaningful and collaborative for subjects, users compete for the attention of the Other and each other. Such forms of competition are built into platforms by the platforms themselves through the forms of likes, and other metrics where users are constantly told to compare their own performance and popularity with that of others.

We could also see the psychodynamics between the individual user and their siblings as attempts to make sense of the platform / Other through acts of communication, collaboration, etc. This comes close to the Lacanian Discourse of the Hysteric where the subject is driven by an anxiety to know what the Other is hiding from them. In forming digital relations with others, the individual subject hopes to find answers and that they may together discover a reality that the Other tries to mask. Such a subject position is not surprising given the fact that commercial platforms exploit users and often only *pretend* to occupy the position of a containing caregiver, while actually ruthlessly using subjects for purposes of profit maximization. The (unconscious) knowledge of forming an alliance with others to rebel, subvert, or extract the truth from the Other provides enjoyment for users. As Lacan noted, the feeling of (quasi) sexual satisfaction is achieved in talking to *others*. While platforms may limit and police the polymorphous chaos and potential of *le sexual*, users achieve a sense of pleasure through communicating, competing, arguing with and often feeling disappointed by others.

Conclusion

In this article, I have conceptualised social media platforms as being shaped by both infantile and adult sexualities. Drawing on ideas by Jean Laplanche, I have outlined the psychodynamics between the user, the platform and other users that are sexual in different ways. Users enter platform relations by embodying a desire for unconscious sexuality, which is then morphed into specific (dis)pleasure routes that are akin to adult sexuality. Social media today are thus perhaps all equally shaped by the logic of the drive (Dean), a belief of the existence of the Other (Flisfeder) and psycho-sexual relations between the user, platform and actual other users (my position). The notion of propping is helpful to consider further here. For Laplanche, it is linked to infantile sexuality. Propping constitutes a move from vital biology to metaphor or representation. If social media has become our contemporary metaphor, this has not only to do with capitalism itself (Flisfeder) but with an originary, ontological process that enabled the existence of the subject's *ability* for creating metaphors and fantasies in the first place. This ability, as I have argued elsewhere, is distinctly tied to questions of affect, representation and forms a blueprint for the power of visual, and by extension digital, communication (Johanssen Chapter 1). Such a perspective makes conceptual space for the intrinsic links between sexuality, how it changes over the course of psychosexual development, and platforms of (digital) communication. It is thus no coincidence that commercial platforms tap into and mould such modes of sexuality into breathless and excessive arousal patterns (Johanssen & Krüger).

³ It is beyond the scope of this article to adequately consider the important scholarship by Juliet Mitchell on siblings, hysteria and sibling rivalry. My section on the role of siblings could be further developed through her work.

While platforms provide fairly authoritative and exploitative infrastructures that users engage with, it is important to stress that users also form relations with each other. While they may often feel dissatisfied or locked in a cycle of competition, there are also moments of genuine cooperation and care that emerge on social media despite rigid platform rules and constraints. Just like siblings manage to create their own worlds, codes and playful expressions of care that remain unnoticed by parents. Platforms are thus never solely characterised by alienation or exploitation.

In this article, I have written about a regression to infantile sexuality which is embodied by users and then transformed into adult sexuality by platforms. I do not mean to argue that regression is to be seen in a critical manner; rather it represents human beings' desire to unleash their creativity and potential and feel recognised by others in a safe environment that is both enigmatic and pleasurable. This potential is epitomised by platforms today, but it is always thwarted or disappointed by capital. If platforms were truly free from commercial interests, they would perhaps enable a different sense of freedom for users.

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