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Confessing sex in online student communities

Yasmine Dominguez-Whitehead*
Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand
27 St. Andrews Road, Parktown 2193, Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: Yasmine.Dominguez-Whitehead@wits.ac.za

Kevin A. Whitehead
School of Human & Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: Kevin.Whitehead@wits.ac.za

Brett Bowman
School of Human & Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand
Private Bag 3, Wits 2050, Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: Brett.Bowman@wits.ac.za

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* Corresponding author.

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.

Keywords: sex, confessions, online communities, normativity, transgressions

1. Introduction

University students have increasing access to computers, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other forms of online communities (Chen & Peng, 2008; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 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, Benwell, & Attenborough, 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 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 practises, 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, re-asserted 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, Hallberg, Bohlin, & Skoog, 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, Greenfield, & Tynes, 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 & McCabe, 2015) and interactions relating to sexual health (Mustanski, Greene, Ryan, & Whitton, 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, Parks, Zimmerman, Brito, & Christakis, 2009). Facebook can also be used to engage in voyeurism (Martínez-Alemán & Wartman, 2009) and to produce and resist normative gender and sexuality (De Ridder & 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 sites is ensured by the use of a separate (non-Facebook-based) site to which participants can anonymously submit their confessions, which are then collected and posted to the Facebook site by the site's administrator.

The two sites were purposively selected based on them having been in existence long enough to have a substantial number of posts, with the North American site having been founded in 2012 and the South African site in 2013. Furthermore, the selection of these particular sites enabled us to identify phenomena that occurred recurrently in online settings associated with universities located on two different continents, thus suggesting the transferability of the findings across different national contexts. The data on which our analysis is based consisted of a total of 49 sex-related initial posts (25 from the North American site and 24 from the South African site) and the comments subsequently made by other users. Given the focal interest of this paper, the data set on which it is based only included posts (and their corresponding comments) that explicitly took up the topic of sex. Additionally, only posts submitted between 2013 and 2015 were included, as a result of sample saturation being achieved once the posts from these years had been collected and analyzed.

The data used for our study are freely available to any person with an internet connection and a Facebook account. While this does not imply that there are no ethical issues involved in using these interactions as research data (see, e.g., Jowett, 2015), our use of the interactions without seeking informed consent from all users (which would not be feasible) is

consistent with currently available ethical guidelines in this regard (e.g., BPS, 2013). It is noteworthy that any potential risk of harm to participants as a result of using the data for research purposes is no greater than the potential risks associated with any other use, as a result of being publicly available (see, e.g., Kaufman & Whitehead, 2016). In addition to the naturally occurring anonymity of the initial posts (as described above) ensuring that the identities of these posters are not revealed, we have redacted the pictures and other identifiers associated with the anonymous posts in order to anonymize the universities associated with the sites we sampled. We have also anonymized all subsequent posters by replacing their first names with pseudonyms and redacting their last names and profile pictures. In addition, the first names of any other Facebook users "tagged" in posts have been replaced with pseudonyms, and their last names and other potential identifying content in the posts have been redacted.

Our analysis follows a discourse analytic approach based on the principles of conversation analysis (CA) (see, e.g., Schegloff, 2007a). Although CA was developed primarily to examine talk-in-interaction and other embodied conduct, a number of recent studies have demonstrated its utility for analyzing text-based online interactions (for a recent review, see Paulus et al., [2016]). A centrally important characteristic of CA for the purposes of our study is the privileging of participants' orientations, and attending analytically to only the "membership categories" (Sacks1972a; 1972b) that the participants treat as relevant (see, e.g., Schegloff, 1997; 2007b). In accordance with this principle, analytic claims are grounded in the observable orientations of the participants, rather than being based on the agendas or categories analysts may deem to be most significant. In addition to drawing upon qualitative analyses of the fine-grained details of talk and texts, a central resource for CA is that any next turn in an interactional exchange displays its producer's understanding of the meaning or implications of the prior turn to which it is responding (Schegloff, 2007a), thus providing a

built-in means of "checking" analytic claims against the endogenously produced analyses of the participants themselves.

Consistent with this orientation, our analysis focuses on two interrelated aspects of the data, the first relating to the participants' orientations and the stances (Jaffe, 2009; Langlotz & Locher, 2012) they display through the observable details of the language used in the initial posts, and the second relating to their uptake and further unfolding through the interactions, and in the stances displayed, in comments following the initial posts. Specifically, by submitting a post for placement on a "Confessions" site designed for a particular student community, the initial poster implicitly proposes from the outset that the content of the post is "confessable", and invites other members of the community to evaluate it as such. Thus, close examination of the design of these initial sex related posts offers insights into participants' orientations to the kinds of acts, situations and beliefs that are treated as either sexually normative or potentially transgressive. It should be noted, however, that producing confessions is not in all cases the primary action the language of the initial posts is designed to accomplish, with some posts constructed to perform bragging, rationalizations, or other related actions. However, in these cases material treated as "confessable" is nonetheless introduced in the service of these other actions, and the main action(s) being performed still serve to construct normative boundaries with respect to sex and sexuality.

By examining the subsequent comments in the thread, we then consider some ways in which other participants ratify or contest the "confessable" character of the sexual content of the initial post, thereby revealing areas of consensus and contestation with respect to the normative boundaries to which the initial poster was oriented. In examining these features of the exchanges we demonstrate both how particular aspects of sex are (re)produced as normatively taken-for-granted, as well as how what is taken-for-granted can be resisted or

transgressed. Thus, we examine interactional practices in the data with respect to two recurrent ways in which the initial posts were responded to, namely by either ratifying or contesting their confessability, with the extracts included in the analysis that follows being selected to illustrate the range of recurrent features with respect to these practices that were observable across the data set.

5. Ratifying confessability

The ratification of confessability was accomplished by one or more subsequent posters taking stances toward the initial post that treated it as having indeed included something worthy of confession as a result of constituting a transgression of a social norm. Ratifying responses could be produced in two ways, namely by displaying appreciation of the initial post and by negative sanctioning. In the following sections we discuss examples of each, while also considering the ways in which the initial posts are constructed so as to display the confessable nature of their content.

5.1. Displaying appreciation

Appreciation of initial posts could be displayed in a number of ways, including by praising the post, pointing out the exceptionalism of the post, using celebratory language or producing (textual) laughter directly linked to the confessable content (cf. Langlotz & Locher, 2012). Extract 1 below, from the North American site, is characterized by a sustained orientation on the part of the initial poster to the situation described in the post, along with her[1] reported sexual act in the situation, as transgressive, with the responsive posts including a number of displays of appreciation.

Extract 1:



December 11, 2013 ·

761

My old roomate from the dorms had a boyfriend. Her boyfriend would come occasionally, and i of course would give them their space. One night i told her i was going to come back that night. I came back around 3 am ish. Everyone was sleeping, so i quietly changed into pj's without any light and went to lay on my bed. I had the bottom bunk.
I have problems sleeping, and usually sped a good 20 mins on my phone while i try to sleep.
Like 15 minutes later my roommate starts having sex, thinking i was asleep. I WAS NOT! lol
At first i tried to ignore it, i didn't want to make it more awkward by lettign her know i was still awake.
She started to moan softly as did he.
So i decided to enjoy this. LIVE PORN right? hahahah
so i masturbated while they had sex.
and the next morning it was as if nothing had happened

Like Comment

Top Comments

Jack not sure what would be more awkward... you listening to them or them findng out about you hahahaha
20 · December 11, 2013 at 11:42am

Kendall Saucy sex stories... Someone should collect an anthology of these
13 · December 11, 2013 at 11:49am

Jorge Pics or didn't happen.
19 · December 11, 2013 at 12:13pm

Connor You should have just lit up a cigarette.
7 · December 11, 2013 at 12:16pm

Mirkelam ... this is some Ted Bundy level shit
2 · December 11, 2013 at 8:02pm

Dennis Why didn't you join in?
2 · December 11, 2013 at 2:20pm

Lucia Lol Amy
2 · December 23, 2013 at 10:15pm

Martina oh, Avery I knew it.
3 · December 11, 2013 at 11:58am

Jaime Damn! And The Prize goes to you for Confession of the Year!!! Epic

The first evidence of the poster's orientation to the transgressive nature of her report can be seen in the capitalized "I WAS NOT", produced in contrast to her report that her roommate assumed she was asleep, which forcefully treats being awake and in the same room as two other people who are having sex as non-normative. The laughter ("lol") produced immediately following this, along with the subsequent explicit description of the situation as

"awkward", serve to further reinforce this stance toward the events being described as transgressive. Moreover, her report of trying "to ignore it" offers an additional explicit formulation of the nature of being a co-present witness to a sexual act, with the suggestion that it would be "more awkward" were her roommate reciprocally aware of her co-presence. Also significant in this regard is the use of the adjective "softly" in the description, which constructs their sexual act in her presence as designedly surreptitious and intended not to wake her, rather than (for example) a deliberate act of sexual exhibitionism performed in full knowledge of her status as a witness.

The poster's reported decision "to enjoy this", accompanied by her description of it as "LIVE PORN", serve to (re)frame this decision in terms of an activity (watching pornography) that is thereby treated as normative, with the capitalization here adding force to her stance in this regard. This act of reframing, however, simultaneously treats the decision she reports having made as being transgressive, such that forceful reframing of this sort is required in order to claim it to be normative. The tag question ("right?") following this claim invites her audience to align with the claim she has made, while simultaneously downgrading the strength of the claim (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). In doing so, she orients to the possibility that this claim could be disputed, thereby potentially associating her actions with membership in a pathologizing category such as "sexual deviant" or "pervert". The laughter that follows ("hahahah") providing further evidence for this orientation by virtue of taking a non-serious stance toward the claim, and thus implicitly proposing that the stance she has taken should be interpreted as humorous rather than genuinely implicating her membership in such a category.

The poster then reports her performance of a reciprocal sexual act of masturbating. This act is treated as the culmination of the confessional account, as well as being marked through the use of the word "so" at the beginning of the line as the outcome of her reported

decision “to enjoy it” (see, Raymond's [2004] analysis of the use of “so” to mark what follows as an upshot of what has just been said) – which, as described above, had itself been treated as a transgressive decision. Moreover, the final line of the post retrospectively reinforces the non-normative nature of the act, with the claim that “it was as if nothing had happened” implicitly claiming that in fact something extraordinary *had* happened.

A display of appreciation of the post can be seen in Jack’s laughter in the first responsive post, with his repetition of the word “awkward” from the original post also serving to align with the stance produced by the initial poster. In the following responsive post, Kendall offers a further display of appreciation, treating the account as something enjoyable enough to be published in a dedicated collection of such stories. It is also noteworthy that her description of the story as “saucy” (a word with a meaning along the lines of “playfully rude” when applied to sexual matters) also contributes to her alignment with the confessable nature of the events described in the initial post. Following several intervening posts in which no clear displays of appreciation are produced, Lucia displays appreciation for the post by producing laughter (“Lol”) and tagging another user, thereby treating the post as humorous and worthy of bringing to the attention of another Facebook user. In the final post shown in this extract, Jaime displays extreme appreciation for the initial post, treating it as an outstanding confession by awarding it an accolade and positively assessing it as “Epic.”

A similar process of the construction of a confessable act followed by ratification through appreciative responses can be seen in Extract 2 below, from the South African site.

Extract 2:



The initial poster in this case brags to a specifically addressed individual, who he suggests "bang[s] a different girl every week", before claiming that while this individual was "chasing" another "victim" he (the poster) "had a session with that girl you left me behind with last week at res thinking that just because I am a Christian I won't bonk her." The contrast here between the addressed individual's proposed, religiously based, expectations of the poster's behavior and the actual sexual behavior he reports serve to treat the behavior as transgressive and therefore confessable, at least for someone of his religious persuasion. The laughter following this report further reinforces this stance, while also treating the actions as constituting a humorous come-uppance for someone whose own sexual behavior he has treated as transgressive earlier in the post by describing the frequency of his sexual encounters and using the category "victim" to refer to the woman involved. He then accounts for his actions while simultaneously highlighting their transgressive nature by claiming that "Even Christian guys have needs", thereby emphasizing the contrast between the behavior he has claimed would be expected of someone of his self-identified religious category and his

actual behavior. In ending the post with a claim that he is "off to a prayer meeting" and that his God will forgive him, he further reinforces the confessable nature of his actions by claiming continued membership in this religious category, despite having treated the category as ill-fitted to the behaviour he has claimed to have performed (cf. Sacks' 1972a; 1972b discussion of category-bound actions).

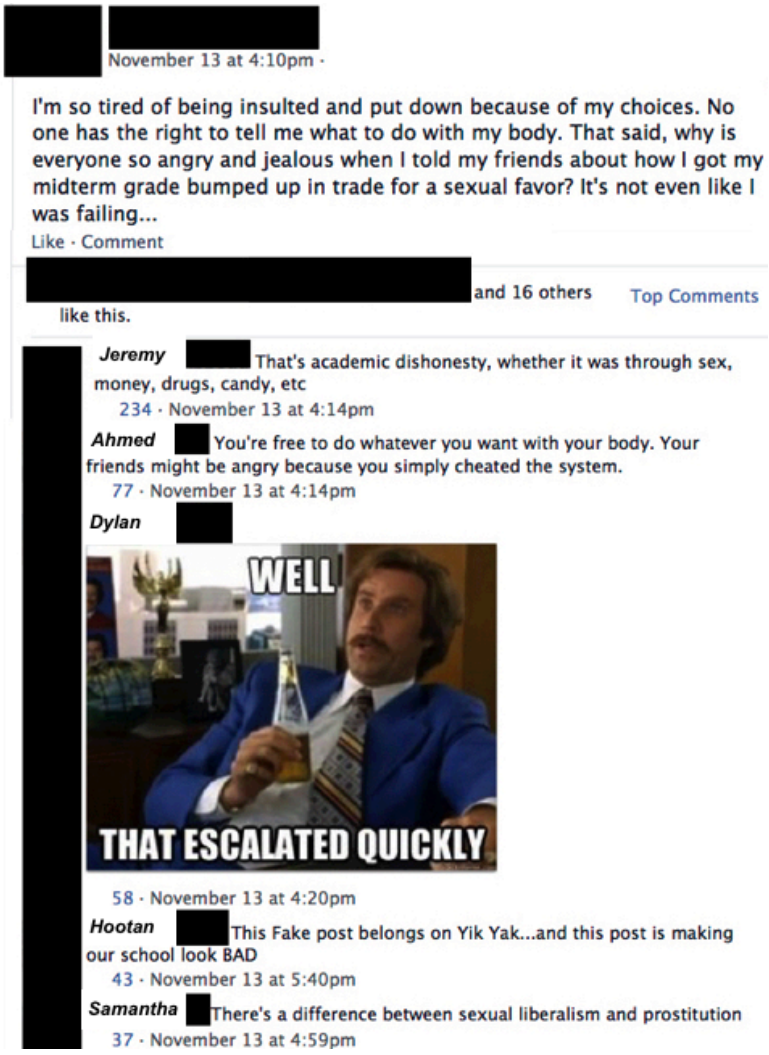
In the first responding post, Lu-Love produces extreme laughter, "lmao" ("laughing my ass off"), thereby showing appreciation for the original post as humorous, before aligning with the proposed morally transgressive character (specifically on a religious basis) of the actions the original poster has reported by writing "Nkosi thethelela", an isiZulu expression that translates as "God forgive." The second response, by Themba, more explicitly appreciates the initial post, positively evaluating it as "cracking" before delivering a religious blessing ("God bless you") that may be read as either praise for the original poster or as a suggestion that he is in need of God's blessing as a result of his actions. Following a third response by Dennis (who does not display appreciation but does continue the religion-themed orientations to the relevance of forgiveness seen in the preceding posts), Bangizwe's response treats the initial poster's confession as extraordinary enough to make one faint, before offering a display of praise that further aligns with the religious tone of the thread.

Extracts 1 and 2 thus demonstrate how posters design and treat their confessed actions as transgressive, and how confessions may be ratified by responding participants expressing appreciation for them. In contrast to the positive orientation to the original post seen in displays of appreciation such as these, the confessability of the content of the original post could also be ratified through responses in which a negative or disaligning stance to the original poster was displayed, as illustrated in the following section.

5.2 Negative sanctioning

This type of response involved displays of disapproval of sexual acts reported by the initial poster. The following exchange from the North American site provides an example of this type of negative sanctioning in response to the initial poster's report of performing a "sexual favour" in order to get a grade "bumped up."

Extract 3:



In this extract, the initial poster expresses indignation at reported negative reactions s/he has received on the basis of his/her reported "sexual favor." In formulating this expression of indignation, the poster invokes a norm of having the sole right to decide what to do with his/her body, and offers a claim that "It's not even like I was failing" as a mitigating factor with respect to his/her reported actions. The poster thus (unlike those in Extracts 1 and 2)

claims his/her reported actions to be within acceptable normative boundaries, while simultaneously positioning him/herself in opposition to those who s/he reports have been "angry and jealous" when s/he told them about this sexual act. In addition, s/he implies that negative reactions such as these may have been (more) justified had s/he been failing the class in question. In doing so, s/he orients to the confessability not only of his/her reported sexual actions, but also to the stance s/he is taking in the post in defending these actions, while at the same time inviting others to align with his/her position in this regard.

In response, Jeremy expresses disapproval of the reported actions on moral grounds, claiming that the original poster's reported actions constitute "academic dishonesty." Jeremy thus aligns with the sanctioning responses the initial poster has attributed to his/her friends, but does so by invoking a general principle of academic (dis)honesty that he claims applies to a range of other potential objects that could similarly be exchanged for a better grade. He thus treats the initial poster's reported action as transgressive, but on the basis of what s/he was receiving (a better grade) rather than specifically because s/he was using sex to receive it. The second response, by Ahmed, acknowledges that the initial poster has autonomy over his/her body, but negatively sanctions the sexual actions s/he has reported by noting that s/he has, "simply cheated the system", thereby invoking a similar principle of honesty to that on which Jeremy's sanctioning was based.

In the following response, Dylan makes use of a meme to suggest that the exchange has "escalated quickly", thereby orienting to the sanctioning that has taken place in the first two responses, and the polarized stances that have been taken by those who produced them, in contrast to that taken by the initial poster. Following this post, Hootan questions whether the act reported in the initial post actually happened, referring to the post as "Fake", while also claiming that "this post is making our school look BAD", thereby suggesting that sexual acts of the sort reported in the original post are morally wrong, such that reporting them

would tarnish an institution's reputation. The most extreme negative sanctioning in the exchange is produced by Samantha, as she contrasts "sexual liberalism and prostitution." In doing so, she implies that, rather than the stance of "sexual liberalism" the original poster has ostensibly taken, the poster has actually engaged in "prostitution", which Samantha treats through this contrast as a morally questionable act.

Although there is contestation over whether the sexual act reported in the original post actually occurred, the responses are aligned in their negative sanctioning of the act (or acts of this nature more generally), with their collective sanctioning serving to build a consensus with respect to the morally transgressive nature of such acts. As Extract 4 demonstrates, however, in some cases negative sanctioning of this sort was responded to by other participants defending the initial poster against the sanctioning. In this extract from the South African site, the initial poster reports having sexual intercourse with his/her cousin, and the responses include both negative sanctioning and a defense of the poster.

Extract 4:



The initial post in this case treats the sexual act as transgressive in a number of ways, including by rationalizing through an account invoking academic pressures, expressing guilt, and asking for advice on how to end the relationship. The poster treats his/her transgression as hinging specifically on his/her kinship relationship with the woman s/he reports having a

sexual relationship with (as displayed in the repeated mentions of the kinship category "cousin"), thus orienting to the well-known normative injunction against incest.

A number of sanctioning responses serve to ratify the claimed transgression of the reported sexual act, seizing upon the kinship category "cousin" in highlighting the status of the act as incest. For example, Sizanani asks, "How the fuck could u smash ur own cousin dawg", while Alanna follows shortly thereafter by asking, "Your cousin? The fuck is wrong with you??" Other sanctioning responses treat the reported actions as violating religious doctrines, with Dino and Thebe producing similar suggestions that the protagonists "need Jesus", and Thebe invoking a racialized basis for treating the actions as transgressive (cf. Whitehead, 2012). Still others treat the actions as transgressive without stating an explicit basis for this treatment, as seen in Regina's "Yall r sick" and Mthunzi's "Sies sani" (an expression that translates as "gross sonny").

However, moral-religious discourses were also used in this exchange to defend the initial poster, as seen in the final response shown in the extract. By beginning this post with the word "Wincest" (an apparent concatenation of "win" and "incest"), Cameron treats the act reported in the initial post as one of incest, while reframing the term in a positive way, in contrast to the condemnation produced by previous posters. He then invokes a principle of liberalism to explicitly defend the initial poster's actions, before using a Biblical quote to admonish those who he suggests have acted unjustifiably judgmentally. Thus, although this post serves to defend the initial poster, it nonetheless recognizes the normative bases on which the behavior reported in the initial post has been condemned.

6. Contesting confessability

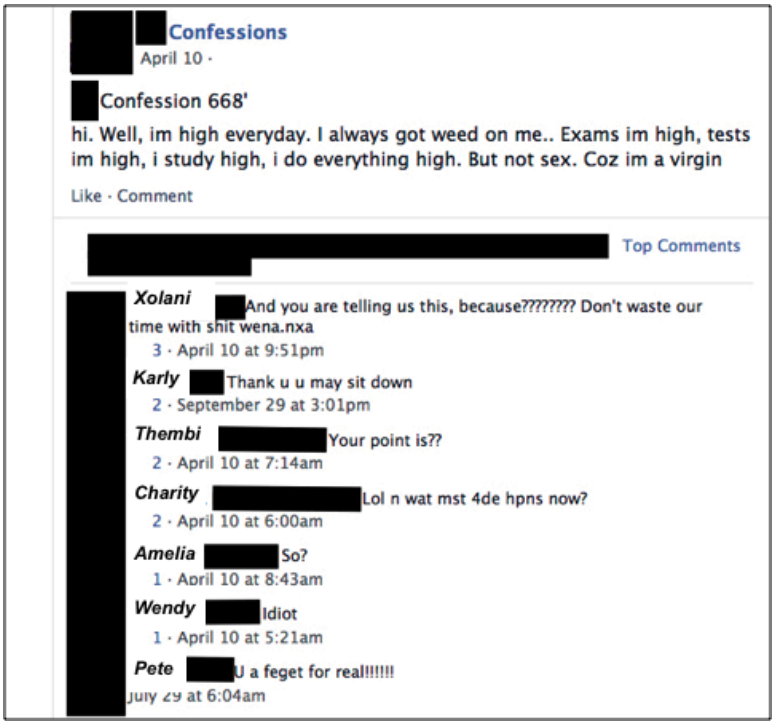
In contrast to the practices discussed in the previous sections through which the contents of initial post could be ratified as transgressive and thus confessable, on some occasions

confessability was challenged or contested. In the following sections, we consider two ways in which confessions were contested, namely by questioning the initial post and by producing comments that are peripheral to the sexual confession.

6.1 Questioning the initial post

These responses involved explicit challenges to the initial poster's implicit claim of the confessable act or stance represented in the post. An example of this is shown in Extract 5 from the South African site.

Extract 5:

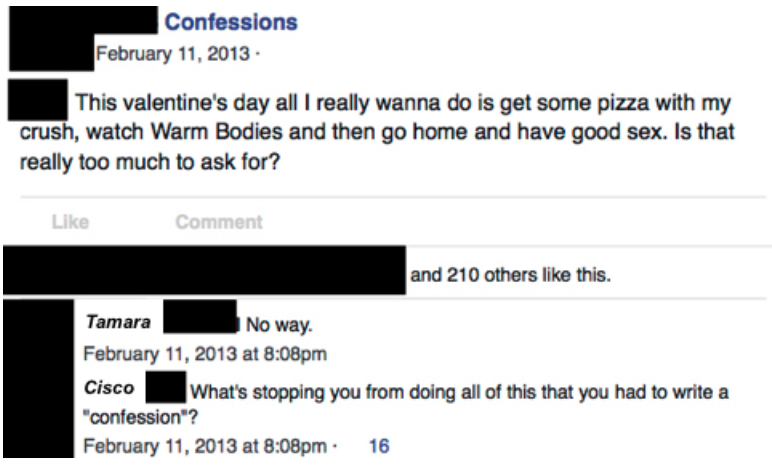


In this extract, the initial poster treats both his/her regular use of marijuana and his/her membership in the category "virgin" as confessable, but in response a number of participants challenge their status as such by questioning why the anonymous poster has posted this content in the first place. In response, Xolani asks, "And you are telling us this, because???????? Don't waste our time with shit wena. Nxa" ("wena" means "you" in isiZulu, and "nxa", when used in this way, is an expression of irritation). Karly's response exhibits a

tone reminiscent of a teacher addressing a student who has stood up and delivered an irrelevant contribution, as she produces (apparently sarcastic) thanks before instructing the poster to "sit down." Similarly dismissive responses are produced by Thembi, who asks, "Your point is?"; Charity, who produces laughter ("Lol") before asking a question that is difficult to make sense of, but which seems to be asking what the initial poster is expecting should happen now; and Amelia, who posts, "So?" These participants thus treat the content of the initial post as unremarkable and an unworthy contribution to the site, thereby treating being a virgin (along with the reported drug use) as something that does not transgress normative boundaries and therefore as something that is not worthy of confessing. It is noteworthy that responses from Wendy and Pete include explicit insults directed at the initial poster. While these participants do not specify the basis for their animosity, their comments are consistent with other participants' treatment of the initial post as an inadequate, non-confessable contribution to the site.

Another example of an initial anonymous post being questioned is shown in Extract 6 below, from the North American site.

Extract 6:



The initial poster's reference to a "crush" in this extract implies that the person referred to does not know that s/he is an object of the poster's desire, with the poster's expression of his/her desire to have "good sex" with this person being a possible basis for the confessability

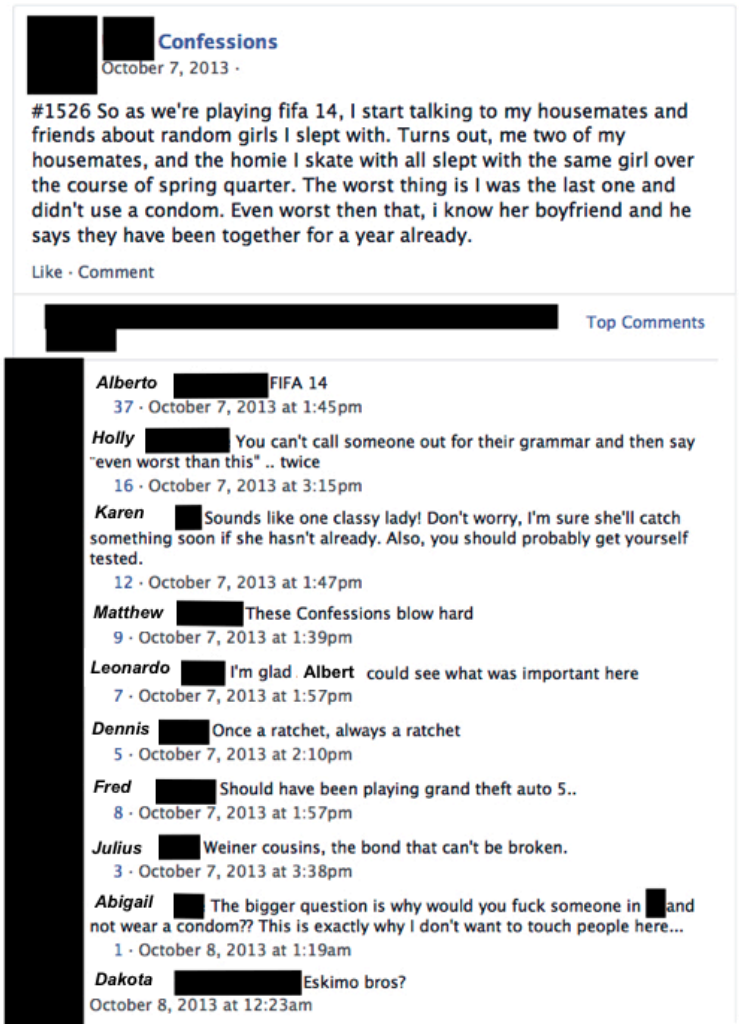
of the content of the post. However, by concluding the post with the question, "Is that really too much to ask for?", the poster treats what s/he desires as modest or unremarkable, and thereby implicitly complains about not being in a position to receive it, which may be a subtle way of proposing that the desire for something normative is, somewhat paradoxically, transgressive or confessable.

The first response to the post, by Tamara, is a terse "No way" that appears to be sarcastically orienting to the unremarkable character of what the initial poster has confessed. Her use of a period at the end of this comment may be a way of textually conveying a flat tone, in contrast to the way in which an exclamation point would intensify the comment and thereby treat the initial post as significant or praiseworthy (cf. Langlotz & Locher, 2012). While this response only indirectly questions the confessability of the initial post, the second response by Cisco explicitly questions why it has been posted on the site. Cisco thus treats the initial post as unnecessary because there are no normative barriers to achieving the desires described therein, with the use of quotation marks around the word "confession" serving to problematize the word, thereby displaying a skeptical stance as to the legitimate confessability of the initial post.

6.2 Producing peripheral comments

Participants also challenged what counts as a confession by producing comments not relating to the confessed sexual act or situation itself, but instead relating to peripheral aspects of the initial post. In other words, responding participants in these cases implicitly resist or dismiss the confession by focusing on parts of the post not produced as integral features of its confessable sex-related character. An example of this is shown in Extract 7, from the North American site.

Extract 7:



In this extract, the initial poster treats sleeping with "the same girl" that three other known-in-common people have slept with as a transgressive and confessable act. This stance is explicit in the poster's formulations of successive additional details of the events as "The worst thing…" and "Even worst then that…" He thus treats the sharing of a sexual partner as a negative or transgressive act, with this being worsened by his position in the order of sexual encounters, his failure to use a condom, and the sexual partner's relationship status.

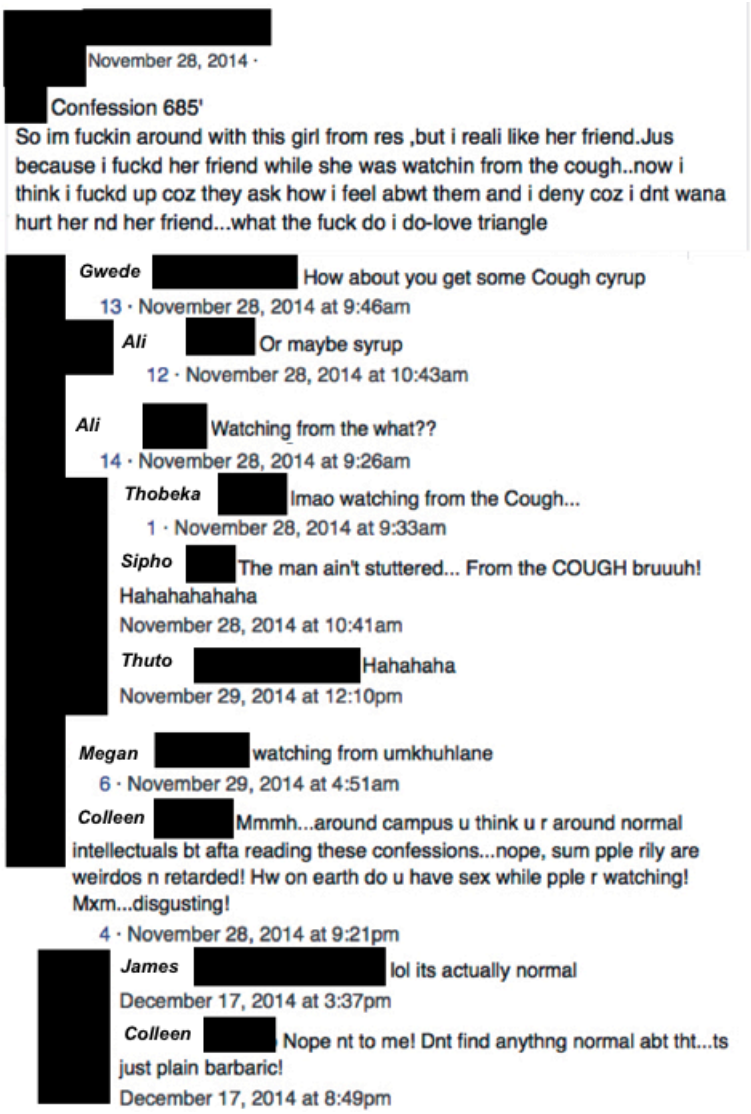
While a number of responding participants (including Karen, Dennis, Julius, Abigail and Dakota) comment on various aspects of this sexual confession (cf. the analyses of Extracts 1-4 above), others pursue elements of the initial post that have not been treated as integral parts of the confession. This can be seen in Alberto's response, which simply

reproduces the name of the video game mentioned by the initial poster. Alberto's capitalization of the acronym "FIFA", may be designed as a correction of the initial poster's lack of capitalization, or his response may simply be a way of commenting on the significance of this being the game the initial poster was reportedly playing. In either case, the comment resists the confessability in the initial post by treating the name of the video game as its only noteworthy element. Similarly, Holly dis-attends to the sexual content of the initial post and instead comments on the grammatical incorrectness of the poster's successive "The worst thing…" and "Even worst…" formulations, thereby treating the post's solecism as more noteworthy than its proposed sexual transgression. Leonardo also comments on the video game, as his apparent response to Alberto's comment (using the Anglicized contraction of his name, "Albert") provides further evidence that Alberto's comment was designed to identify the video game as the noteworthy feature of the initial post. Similarly, Fred's comment also focuses on the video game by suggesting that the initial poster should have played a different game.

Significantly, two of the posts that do mention the sexual content of the post use categories that refer to males who have had a sexual relationship with the same partner, namely "Weiner cousins" (in Julius' post) and "Eskimo bros" (in Dakota's post). These posts (particularly in light of the availability of two such categories that can be used to refer to the same thing) may further demonstrate that, rather than constituting sexual transgressions, the actions described in the initial post can be viewed as a commonplace and established feature of contemporary sex culture.

A final extract, from the South African site, provides a further illustration of the way confessions can be contested by commenting on peripheral aspects of the post, as a number of responding participants take up the initial poster's apparent mis-spelling of "couch"' rather than commenting on the sexual act reported in the post.

Extract 8:



In this case, the initial poster treats as confessable having sex with one person while another person, whom he is romantically interested, watches (cf. the treatment in Extract 1 of having sex in the presence of others). He orients to having transgressed a norm of romantic and/or sexual relationships ("i think i fuckd up") and requests advice ("what the fuck do i do"). Gwede's response takes up this request for advice, but the advice offered takes up the initial poster's use of the word "cough" rather than the sex-related problem identified, as he suggests the poster could "get some Cough cyrup", with Ali in turn responding to Gwede's comment by correcting his mis-spelling of "syrup." In a separate response to the original post, Ali also questions the word "cough", and Thobeka responds to Ali with laughter

followed by a repetition of the same formulation produced by the initial poster. Sipho adds a further response to Ali, emphasizing (through repetition and capitalization) the word "cough", in contrast to Ali's treatment of it as nonsensical or a possible error, and Thuto produces appreciative laughter following Sipho's post. In another response, Megan produces a modified version of the initial post's "watchin from the cough", replacing cough with "umkhuhlane", which is isiZulu for "influenza", or perhaps in this context translatable as "cough." Participants thus collaboratively focus on the initial poster's use of the word "cough" and dis-attend to the confessable sexual features of the post, thereby tacitly dismissing the salience of the sexual content.

In the first comment in which the sexual content of the initial post is taken up, it is explicitly treated as transgressive, as Colleen negatively sanctions people (presumably including the initial poster) who think they are "normal intellectuals', claiming that they should instead (based on "these confessions") be categorized as "weirdos n retarded." She then offers an even more specific basis for this assessment by questioning how the original poster could "have sex while pple r watching!" before negatively evaluating this as "disgusting!" thereby explicitly treating these particular actions as category-bound to the negative categories she has introduced. This response demonstrates that the sexual material in the initial post *could* be treated as transgressive, and thus that the preceding posts could be read as specifically dis-attending to the potentially confessable content of the post in order to make light of the poster's mis-spelling of "couch." In response to the stance taken by Colleen, however, James produces laughter and suggests that "its actually normal", thereby contesting Colleen's claims regarding the transgressive nature of having sex while others watch, after which Colleen further contests this claim and again negatively evaluates these actions as "just plain barbaric!" This exchange more explicitly demonstrates the

contestability of the confession in the initial post that was implicitly produced through participants' previous responses to it.

7. Discussion and conclusions

Our analysis has focused on two interrelated features of the exchanges in the Facebook "Confessions" sites examined, namely the ways in which initial posts on the sites display stances with respect what is confessable (and thus transgressive of normative boundaries of sexuality), and the ways in which subsequent comments on the initial post ratified or challenged its proposed confessable content. Our findings advance contemporary understandings of the use of confessional practices in two interrelated ways. The first involves the degree to which our results surface *both* the content and the form of confessional acts. While Foucault (1990) and several subsequent Foucauldian scholars (see, e.g., Grenz, 2005; Pitcher, 2016; Tell, 2010) clearly describe the content of sex talk that characterizes the act of confession in modern contexts, our analysis draws attention to precisely *how* such content and actions are produced in naturalistic interactional settings. This analysis brings sharply into focus the contingencies involved in negotiating the form of the confessions which often represent the taken-for-granted starting points of many Foucault inflected studies (Elden, 2005; Jackson, 2005). It demonstrates sex as a self-referential category or act – sex in and of itself – is not necessarily immediately accepted as, by definition, confessable. Rather, it is the configuration of the act of sex within situated and context-bound normative frameworks which marks the act as exceptional and/or transgressive, and therefore confessable. Our analysis identifies a set of such configurations for participants in the online settings we examined. Secondly, the use of CA on online sites demonstrates the types of analytic power enabled by new technologies of confessional practice through web-based architecture. We have shown how the application of CA to anonymous online interactions

enables fine-grained analysis of the very interactional constituents of confessions relating to sex, demonstrating precisely *how* confessional modes of communication are achieved. This approach promises to strengthen and supplement a range of existing descriptions of the forms and functions that such confessional techniques have taken under various historical conditions (Foucault, 1990) and in pre-internet settings (Sauter, 2014).

Our findings, strengthened by the intersection of both our analytic method and selection of naturalistic settings, thus demonstrate how participants construct the actions they report as transgressing normative expectations regarding the categories of people with whom one can(not) appropriately engage in sex with (e.g., oneself, someone responsible for assigning a grade, a family member, a "crush", a person who has had sex with several other known people, a person who is in a relationship, a person with whom one is not romantically involved, or nobody at all), for what reasons (e.g., because it is enjoyable, to fulfill one's "needs", to improve a grade or to relieve stress) and under what other conditions such engagement can(not) appropriately occur (e.g., while someone is in the same room, concurrently with being a practitioner of a particular religion, with the knowledge and implied complicity of relevant others, after getting pizza and watching a movie, as the last of a number of people to do so, or while someone watches). Additionally, our analyses demonstrate some of the interactional mechanisms through which norms around sexuality can be reproduced, ratified or contested. Responses to confessions that ratify what has been confessed (such as displays of appreciation and negative sanctioning) serve to reproduce the relevance of these normative boundaries as bases for interpreting whether a given reported behavior was (in)appropriate (cf. Heritage, 1984). Conversely, the comments of participants who defended those who have been subjected to negative sanctioning serve to challenge the construction of the normative boundaries invoked through the sanctioning, but still treat such boundaries as potentially relevant, through the very process of contesting them. Finally,

treating initial posts as non-confessable (including by directly questioning the confession or by commenting on peripheral features), serves to challenge the claim that a transgression has taken place, thereby constructing what was reported in the posts as falling within established or accepted normative boundaries rather than transgressing sexual norms.

The Facebook "Confessions" sites we examined thus offer unique insights into the situated and naturally occurring negotiation and contestation of normativity with respect to sex in a particular type of education-related setting. Close examination of interactions on sites such as these allow for empirically grounded descriptions, based on participants' own actions and orientations, of some of the contours and potential fault lines of normative sexuality in contemporary society.

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Notes

[1] We have assumed that the poster identified as female based on her identification of her roommate as female combined with the standard practice in this university of assigning dorm roommates on a same-sex basis. We make similar assumptions in other cases in which the gender of the initial poster is clearly oriented to by the participants, but in cases where there is no clear evidence to this effect we use gender-neutral language in referring to them.

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