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#RelationshipGoals: Fantasies of The Good Life in Young People’s Digitally-Networked Peer Cultures

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Introduction

This paper explores how social media and smart devices shape young people’s fantasies of intimate life and relationships, including romantic, sexual and familial, by facilitating new visibilities and connectivities for performing sexuality and gender. While sexuality is typically considered to be a private, personal and intimate matter that is experienced between two people or in the confines of the hetero-familial home (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018), the unprecedented intrusion of digital technologies into our intimate lives has profoundly blurred the boundary between the private and the public (Naezer and Ringrose 2018; Duguay 2016a). This has led to a moral panic where social media and mobile communication are positioned as unnatural ‘sites of sexual contamination and corruption of childhood innocence’ (Etheredge 2016, p. 549) with online safety interventions seeking to limit and contain young people’s digital engagements (see also Korkmazer, De Ridder and Van Bauwel 2020). However, the focus on young people as individual, rational agents capable of responsibly managing their digital practices fails to recognise how they are entangled in a ubiquitous digital media-scape that shapes their relationships in unpredictable ways.

Drawing on creative group and individual interviews with young people aged 11 - 18 years old in England and Wales in 2018, this paper assembles data that addresses the changing nature of intimacies in young people’s digitally-networked lives. Informed by Lauren Berlant’s work (2008, p. viii), I consider how Instagram, YouTube and Facebook create intimate publics that flourish as ‘porous, affective scene[s] of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an “x”’. For example, I demonstrate how the ‘Relationship Goals’ hashtag on Instagram circulates certain ‘fantasies of the good life’ that orients young people towards heteronormative future imaginaries. However, I also illustrate the ‘inherent promiscuity of new media’ (Chun and Friedland

2015, p. 3) where publicising romantic relationships online also works to unsettle ‘utopian, optimism- sustaining versions of intimacy’ that promote (hetero)normative fantasies of the good life and highlights the phenomenon’s inherent vulnerability, ephemerality and ‘potential failure to stabilize closeness’ (Berlant 1998, p. 282). I also consider how the good life is taking on new forms through virtual personal assistants such as Alexa and Siri.

By offering a nuanced exploration of the role that social media and smart devices play in young people’s intimate lives, this paper contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to support children and young people to navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing digital age where gender and sexuality are taking on new, slippery meanings (Scott et al. 2020). I conclude by addressing the implications of these findings for practitioners in schools and youth settings as well as signal areas for future research.

EXPLORING YOUNG PEOPLE’S DIGITAL SEXUALITIES THROUGH CREATIVE, VISUAL AND ARTS-BASED METHODS

This paper assembles data from my Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded doctoral research (see Marston 2020). The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Cardiff University’s School of Social Sciences. For this study, I worked with twenty-five young people aged 11 – 18 years from England and Wales over a period of fifteen-months. Participants were recruited from four fieldwork sites including: Westland College, a Sixth Form based in a small coastal town in England catering to a predominantly white middle-class pupil population aged 16 – 18 years old; Castell Q, a newly established LGBTQ+ youth group hosted in a post-industrial urban town in the South Wales Valleys; Green City School, a secondary school situated in an affluent and centrally-located suburb of an English city that drew pupils from socio-economically and ethnically diverse backgrounds; and Ysgol Mellt, a secondary school located in a small village in south Wales accommodating largely white working-class pupils from the surrounding rural villages.

Other than age and location, there were no specific criteria for participation. While I did try to ensure that participants were from a variety of backgrounds, a larger portion of participants were from England than Wales (16 from England; 9 from Wales). The

participant sample is also skewed towards White British young people (21 participants) and young people who identified as girls (19 girls; 6 boys). However, the study does offer insights into under-explored demographics within existing empirical research on youth digital sexualities which has tended to focus on specific digital practices, such as selfies, sexting, Snapchat and Tumblr, amongst older teenagers and University educated young people (Warfield 2017; Handyside and Ringrose 2017; boyd 2014; Duguay 2016a). All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, except the authors who conducted all the interviews.

In the first phase of the study, twenty-five participants aged between 11 - 18 years old took part in group interviews that drew on creative activities and visual-discursive prompts to elicit discussion. Activities included assembling a map of their digital world through drawing and/or collaging; a photo-elicitation task using social media images and icons that represented relationships; navigating social media and gaming platforms with the researcher; designing digital avatars; and a statement elicitation activity that explored statements frequently reported in the media around the influence of digital technologies on young people's relationships (see Marston 2020).

Seventeen of the original twenty-five participants went on to participate in the second phase of the study which involved semi-structured follow-up interviews. Participants undertook these as individuals or pairs, although one group returned as a three. In these interviews, I elicited discussion by returning to contributions made throughout the creative and visual group interviews (e.g maps, avatars, screenshots). The follow-up interviews situated the participant's accounts within the context of their everyday peer relationships and individual biographies, as well as provided a space to reflect upon the research process.

While I used an array of creative, visual and arts-based methods in my study, this paper largely draws on participant's talk during group interviews and follow-up interviews. In the following discussion I weave together insights from many young people to look at the different ways that relationships surfaced in their talk. In contrast to wider work on young people's digital sexual cultures (Scott et al. 2020; Driver 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2017; Dobson 2015; Ringrose et al. 2012; Duguay 2016a), I do not focus on how a specific digital platform or practice enters into and shapes young people's sexual cultures. Instead I

examine a range including Instagram, YouTube and Facebook as well as virtual personal assistants such as Siri and Alexa in order to find the ‘tangles and patterns’ (Haraway 2016, p. 3) in the way fantasies of the good life are being reconfigured by young people’s digital practices. This paints a rich and heterogeneous picture of contemporary digitally-networked peer cultures.

#RELATIONSHIPGOALS AND INTIMATE ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In *Mediated Intimacy*, Meg-John Barker, Rosalind Gill and Laura Harvey (2018) observe how discourses of management, work and entrepreneurialism are increasingly shaping the way intimate life is discussed. They describe a growing culture of ‘intimate entrepreneurship’ whereby relationship activity is broken down into ‘separate component elements or operations to be organized in a rational and linear process, rather like a factory production line’ (Barker, Gill and Harvey 2018, p. 109). This section illustrates how this entrepreneurial relationship culture was evident in participant’s talk about Instagram and YouTube.

Instagram couples

Instagram is a photo and video-sharing social networking site which allows visual content to be edited with various filters and organised with tags and location information (Leaver Highfield and Abidin 2020). It was a popular platform amongst the participants who described it as ‘inspirational’, ‘idealistic’ (Alex, aged 17, pronouns he/him, Castell Q) and ‘like an ideology of what you want to have in the future’ (Bernard, aged 17, pronouns he/him, Westland College). Notably, participants at Westland College described how stylized, ‘staged’ photos of ‘strangers’ doing ‘romantic’, ‘cute’, ‘couple-y things’ circulated on the platform with the hashtag ‘Relationship Goals’.

Hashtags are metadata tags that work to link content according to a theme or message and are shaped through the communicative habits of those using the platform as well as through the platform affordances prioritising certain modes of expression (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen and Carter 2015). Hashtag tropes often develop in response to the specific features of social media platforms (Highfield and Leaver 2016 p. 50). For example, #RelationshipGoals is part of a wider #Goals subgenre that responds to Instagram’s

circulation of aestheticized, beautified and idealised lifestyle content - #lifegoals, #breakfastgoals, #makeupgoals, #friendshipgoals.

To illustrate the #RelationshipGoals trope, Bernard at Westland College scrolled to an Instagram image of a model-esque hetero-coupling walking hand in hand past a designer fashion store. Other examples noted by Westland participants included couples on the beach, couples having breakfast in bed and couples doing yoga together. These were often posed and professional shots with participants jokingly asking: 'Who's taking that picture?' (Tom, aged 17, pronouns he/him, Westland College). While the implication that a third person is documenting these intimate scenes troubles the monogamy of the hetero-couple form, the circulation of such commercialised images of couples on Instagram nevertheless worked to promote certain expressions of intimacy. Specifically, #RelationshipGoals packages coupledness into separate component operations of shopping, eating, travelling and exercising together and places these consumer-led practices as the pinnacle of intimate bonding (Barker, Gill and Harvey 2018).

YouTube families

Intimate entrepreneurship was not only confined to Instagram but circulated widely through the cross-platform practices of social media celebrities. As Crystal Abidin (2018) outlines, internet celebrity is no longer a case of one-hit viral wonders, it is a rapidly diversifying and evolving economy that is changing the face of celebrity culture. The video-sharing site YouTube has become a key platform for launching celebrity careers with amateur and entrepreneurial uses coexisting and coevolving on the site (Burgess and Green 2013, p. 103). YouTube celebrities are proving to be increasingly central figures in popular and youth culture. For example, a classroom display board dedicated to 'aspiration' at Ysgol Mellt was filled with pupils' posters about YouTube celebrities.

As Aislinn (aged 11, pronouns she/her, Ysgol Mellt) exemplifies below, popular YouTube content often documents intimate scenes of everyday life through daily video logs (vlogs):

Kate: So what YouTubers do you like to follow?

Aislinn: I follow the Ingham Family

Kate: Ok, who are they?

Aislinn: Erm a YouTube family of five, they live in England and they do daily vlogs like every single day and they're almost at one million subscribers

Kate: What sort of stuff do they put in their vlogs?

Aislinn: They do like the adventures they go on, and what holidays they go on, and [...] they tell haters as well that they don't like them [Kate: Yeah] cos haters they just wanna pull you down with them, and you should just get back up

Kate: What sort of haters, what do people say against them?

Aislinn: They say like you can't even blog right, you brag so much about going on holiday and stuff like that and they said that's our choice, they have the money and if they want to take their children on holiday they can, it's up to them, it's not the haters

Kate: What do you enjoy about watching the videos?

Aislinn: What I love about it, is just like how they do like shoutout and they want to include subscribers who actually give them good comments, at the end of every video they have a

few videos [...], and they wanna just say why we love the Ingham family, and I tried to but I just couldn't in the end

Kate: You wanted to do a vlog as well?

Aislinn: I wanted to do a video to send to them, but I just didn't in the end

Kate: What would you have put in it?

Aislinn: Erm, I would have said that I love their vlogs, and I've entered a lot of their giveaways, but I've never see but I don't care, watching you guys makes me happy every single day

The Ingham Family YouTube Channel grants Aislinn access to everyday scenes of familial domesticity along with escape through 'adventures' and 'holidays'. The channel functions as a scene of attachment for a larger intimate public, inviting subscribers into their 'now more than 1 MILLION STRONG FAMILY' (The Ingham Family 2020a). The commitment to uploading vlogs 'every single day' manifests the 'optimistic drive' for 'sustained intimate contact' with their expansive 'family' of subscribers (Berlant 2012, p. 89). Unlike the posed and poised #RelationshipGoals content, YouTube vloggers function within an economy of authenticity often filming on handheld devices and cultivating an amateur aesthetic amidst more polished and edited content. Abidin (2017, p. 6) details how this 'calibrated amateurism' enables successful social media celebrities to strategically re-enact their 'original appeal as "real people"' whose ordinariness has been overcome with the power of self-invention.

Far from amateur, however, The Ingham Family is a commercial enterprise complete with its own branded merchandise and attracting followers through competitive 'giveaways' that reward subscribers who 'give them good comments' with Ipads, dolls, merchandise bundles and more. The channel's content focuses heavily on their three young daughters (aged 13, 9

and 7) with the eldest commanding her own spin-off channel. Furthermore, much of their merchandise is emblazoned with princesses, unicorns, rainbows, sassy phrases and 'girl power' slogans (The Ingham Family 2020b). Correspondingly, the channel ties into a broader global tween market geared towards pre-adolescent girls as an emergent consumer demographic (Kennedy 2018).

The channel's focus on competition, individual choice, resilience ('you should just get back up') and girl power highlight an emotional register centred on cultivating the character and disposition required for surviving in a postfeminist neoliberal society (Gill 2017; McRobbie 2008). This is a cultural context in which 'can-do girls' are celebrated as the ideal subjects of late capitalist society embodying unambiguous success through discourses of empowerment, choice and freedom (Harris 2004). Rather than liberating girls, these consumer-led choices have proved to be highly restrictive demanding a relentlessly upbeat, confident and happy affective state that acquiesces to the exploitative and unequal operations of hetero-patriarchal capitalism (Dobson and Kanai 2018). This 'postfeminist sensibility' can be seen in Aislinn's affective acquiescence to being a good subscriber who purports to be made 'happy every single day' by The Ingham Family (Gill 2017). The chipper way she details her fondness for The Ingham Family echoes the emotional register of the YouTube channel.

The Ingham Family is not, however, a straightforward celebration of the heteronormative family form. For example, the derisive attitudes and 'hate' expressed towards them and their boastful displays, undermines the promotion of wholesome hetero-family life as a force for social good. Instead, The Ingham Family's explicit publicisation of intimate scenes of domesticity is also a corruption of 'private' heterofamilial bonds as the ideal primary source of intimacy (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018). Incorporating their daughters into The Ingham Family franchise is arguably controversial given the focus of online safeguarding discourses on privacy warnings for girls (Dobson and Ringrose 2016).

LGBTQ+ YouTube

Attachment to the hetero-family form is also potentially diluted by the rising fame of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+¹) YouTube vloggers (see Marston 2019; Lovelock 2017; Raun 2016). This content is not niche and participants across my study demonstrated their familiarity with gay and lesbian YouTube celebrities. As Alex (age 17, pronouns he/him) from Castell Q detailed, these vloggers could spark thinking about young people's own intimate lives:

Kate: So I was wondering if any of those spoke to you about how relationships are presented online not just romantic but friendships and other kinds of relationships, and if there's an image that kind of resonates?

Alex: Yeah, the one with Joey and his boyfriend

Interview: Yeah

Alex: Cos I used to watch, before I came out, I used to watch YouTubers like him and when I saw him with his boyfriend I was like ah I'd love to have something like that

Interview: Why, what are they like together?

Alex: They're just like really fun, and like easy-going and they do like really, I remember them doing like really fun videos and like on day outs and stuff and it's just lovely to see

Here Alex details his past enjoyment of the everyday documentation of intimacy in Joey Graceffa's YouTube videos with his boyfriend. Described in the UK press as 'the ultimate YouTube success story' (Griffin 2019, para 1, n.p), Joey Graceffa is an American YouTube personality with over 8.9 million subscribers who produces daily life vlogs and gaming videos. His vlogs often feature his boyfriend Daniel Preda who is a lifestyle blogger, model

¹ LGBTQ+ refers to young people who self-define as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer including non-binary or other trans identities. The plus symbolises the expanding taxonomy of identities that young people are using to describe their sexuality and gender, such as homoromantic or pansexual.

and Instagram celebrity (Preda 2020). Both Joey and Daniel are young, white, lean muscular men with clean-cut good looks. Correspondingly, the success they embody is not only tied to neo-liberal values of 'entrepreneurialism and individual enterprise' but minority identities 'deemed "acceptable" for integration within the status quo' (Lovelock 2017, p. 13). Similar to #RelationshipGoals, Joey and Daniel's YouTube videos convey their union through component relationship steps such as 'Our Love Story!' and 'Moving Into Our New Home!'

Experienced as 'fun', 'easy-going' and 'lovely to see', these videos offered Alex fantasies of having 'something like that' that might have otherwise seemed unattainable. Castell Q was a nascent LGBTQ+ youth group located in the post-industrial south Wales Valleys. A number of scholars have observed how historical legacies of heteronormatively gendered and sexualised community relations loom large in expectations of what young people can do, be and become in post-industrial Wales (Renold and Ivinson 2019; Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012). Joey Graceffa can be seen to offer a form of 'aspirational normalcy' that promises to fulfil the 'desire to feel normal and to feel normalcy as a ground of dependable life' (Berlant 2007, p. 281). In keeping with the seemingly compulsory emotional 'positivity' of visual social media (see Berryman and Kavka 2018; Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018), Joey Graceffa's chipper, playful and comic tone is an appealing reprieve from the mainstream media's historic focus on negative and caricatured portrayals of sexual and gender minorities (MicInroy and Craig 2016). However, the valorisation of these figures as valuable 'role models' for lesbian and gay young people can paradoxically position 'heteronormativity as a potentially enabling force for lesbian and gay youth in the context of neoliberalism' through reifying monogamy, domesticity and marriage (Lovelock 2017 p. 101; Duguay 2016b).

Feminist YouTube

Significantly, this LGBTQ+ content does not sit in isolation but is always in-relation to social media's broader visual culture. Alex detailed how YouTube operated as a complex ecology of content ranging from drag queens, queer activists, feminism, veganism, spirituality, sex, sexuality, mathematics, astrophysics, health and more. Alex's 'fluid spectatorial identifications' extended connections to multiple networks online and offline, offering

different tools with which to negotiate sexuality and gender and was described as expanding his imaginative possibilities rather than diminishing them (Bragg 2015, p. 98). I was struck in particular by his description of how early teen friendships in connection with YouTube fostered an interest in feminism:

Alex:...I started getting into when I, I joined a friendship group in school and they were quite liberal and like when I was about 13, like still then I didn't really know what being gay or what like the patriarchy was and all this stuff, so when I heard these people talking about it I was like 'What? What is this?' (*laughs*) and then they started talking about YouTubers and all this kind of stuff and I came across Hannah Witton and she's quite a big feminist on YouTube [...] I was like woah her videos are really cool and I started watching other YouTubers like her and then it just exploded and like all, like many of the subscriptions I have on YouTube are like so many of them are feminists now and it like just started from one little one I just come across

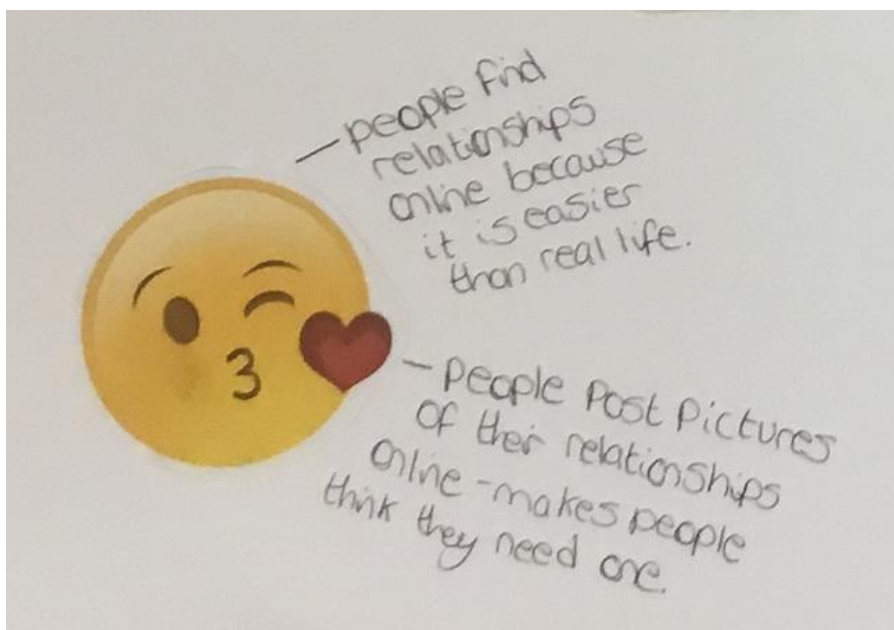
Alex's story resonates with wider research mapping the unprecedented uptake of feminism amongst teenagers in school and online in recent years (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019; Bragg et al. 2018; Ringrose and Renold 2016). Ringrose and Renold (2016, p. 220) describe feminism as an 'incendiary and fiery' force that spreads and catches through group affects 'generating fierce reactions' amongst young people. Similarly, Alex detailed how a young teen friendship group plugged into a larger network of YouTube feminists sparked a fascination that 'exploded' into a voracious and sustained appetite for feminist content through YouTube subscriptions, podcasts and books on sex and relationships. This content introduced a new vocabulary around 'being gay' and 'the patriarchy' which was described as enabling him to 'better equip' himself than in school where 'some things are missing' (Alex's words). Notably, Hannah Witton's (2017) feminist-inspired sex and relationship advice offers important critiques of heteronormative sexual cultures covering consent, pleasure, sexual diversity, healthy relationships, sexual violence, period stigma and much more.

On the one hand, this popular mode of feminism remains tied to postfeminist neoliberal logics that reformulate deeply entrenched intersectional gendered inequities into manageable obstacles to be overcome with the right knowledge and attitude (Dobson and Kanai 2018). For example, Alex's efforts to 'better equip' himself still hail to the rules of self-

optimization and personal responsibility required by a neo-liberal entrepreneurial relationship culture. On the other hand, Alex's passionate investment in feminist content produced by young women on YouTube exemplifies some of the recent shifts in how young people can 'identify (or disidentify) with and "do" gender' (Bragg et al. 2018, p. 2). This does not negate the continuing force with which heteronormative gender binaries structure young people's lives, or how their everyday intimate practices are confounded by the neo-liberal frame of reference they are working in. However, it does point to the 'provisional, messy and ambiguous relations' to digital media 'through which young people learn over time' and through diverse modes of engagement (Driver and Coulter 2018, p. 2). In the next section, I consider how this entrepreneurial relationship culture informs an intensified demand for coupledness online as well as consider the vulnerabilities of enthusiastically investing in imagined heteronormative futures.





Compulsory coupledness

Figure 1: Excerpt from Sarah's map



As exemplified by the above map excerpt (see Figure 1) from Sarah (age 15, pronouns she/her, Castell Q), many participants discussed how digital technologies were incorporated into their romantic relationships. Participants highlighted the practice of signaling one's relationship status with emojis in the bio section of their Instagram profiles. An emoji is a small digital icon that textually mediates affects, which might otherwise be conveyed

through facial expressions, gestures or tone of voice (Paasonen 2015). For example, the 'blowing a kiss' emoji on Sarah's map (see Figure 6) typically conveys feelings of love and affection. Emojis also include food, flags, animals and other symbols which have varying connotations depending on sociocultural conventions (Highfield and Leaver 2016).

At Westland College participants observed how their peers would place a padlock () next to a holding hands emoji () and their partner's initials to indicate that they were 'taken' (Irene, aged 18, pronouns she/her, Westland College). Abidin (2016, p. 58) observes how emojis operate as communicative gifts through which couples visibly signal their union and affirm their commitment to one another. Other notable relationship status emojis included the world emoji () and the beating heart emoji (), which carry the networked affects of 'life' and liveliness. Correspondingly, such symbols work to buttress the couple form as constituting 'a life' (Berlant 1988, p. 282).

Although the above emojis emphasise exclusivity and privacy, sexual and romantic relationships were found to be profoundly social (Pascoe 2010). The young people's talk revealed how these performances occupied a prime place in social media's 'regime of attention', and the visibility, replicability and measurability of these intimate relationships on social media resulted in a different kind of scrutiny amongst their peers (Lasen and Hjorth 2017, p. 126). For example, the circulation of relationship selfies was one of the ways the demand for 'compulsory coupledness' was 'intensified' (Renold and Ringrose 2017, p. 7). The participant's talk demonstrated how encountering these images on social media was laden with affects that provoked a significant degree of suspicion, derision and jealousy along with desire, connection and intimacy.

On her map (see Figure 6), Sarah suggests that the circulation of other people's relationship pictures online contributes to a sense that such relationships are a necessity. She elaborated in her individual interview how she sees people 'posting pictures of their partner' along with inscriptions such as 'my world'. These words echo the expressive relations of the above emojis, indicating the hierarchical ordering of relationships whereby the romantic partner is viewed as all encompassing and having greater importance than other relationships.

Notably, Sarah returned to the topic of relationship selfies several times throughout the fieldwork at Castell Q and troubled the perfect relationships portrayed on social media.

Kate:...Is there anything else on here that you think is important to talk about?

Sarah: Not really, except for like people pretending to have like perfect relationships online and then you see them in real life and they are always arguing, but they want to look good and make other people jealous

Kate: Do you think that happens a lot like people comparing themselves to people's relationships?

Sarah: I think so yeah

Kate: Do you ever do that?

Sarah: I never post anything, but sometimes I think like 'oh I wish our relationship was as close as this' so

Kate: But then you think oh actually this isn't really what the relationship is like?

Sarah: Yeah, they're just posting the best bits

Sarah expresses cautious distrust when people lay claim to 'utopian, optimism- sustaining versions of intimacy' on social media, suggesting that these performances are artificial (Berlant 1998, p. 282). While Sarah admits to occasionally coveting the closeness she

perceives between couples online, this is viewed as ultimately unachievable and based on a selective sharing of the 'best bits'. In contrast to the distant telegenic celebrities of Instagram and YouTube discussed above, the closeness performed by peers on social media was accompanied by the contradiction of seeing the couple 'always arguing' in 'real life'. What she sees is the failure of 'perfect relationships' to fulfill their promise as they are haunted by the intractable fractures and incoherence that are part of the very phenomenon of intimacy (Berlant 1998). The perceived desire to convey perfection and provoke jealousy assumes a competitive relationship culture whereby coupledness is the pinnacle of relational success. Correspondingly, gender and sexuality continue to be organized in linear, oppositional and hierarchical ways familiar to heteronormativity.

Sarah's critique of perfect relationships online was echoed by participants at Westland College, who expressed similarly disparaging attitudes to public displays of affection amongst their peers (see also McGlotten 2013). Scrutinising others romantic practices on social media proved to be an energizing topic during group interviews and participants were equally wary of excesses of intimacy through 'overtly emotional confessions' of love on social media (Lambert 2016, p. 2568). For example, Irene from Westland College detailed how she and her friends responded to another friend's relationship content on social media.

Irene: ...one of my best friends had a relationship [...] and they were always like quite lovey dovey and me and my other friends would comment like 'ergh!' 'vom!' (*laughs*) and like she wouldn't mind, she thought it was funny. We would wind them up, they didn't care. They were doing it on social media, but it was just funny like we'd always comment like 'gross!' and stuff. But erm, I think it's funny because if a girl posts a picture of her and her boyfriend everyone's like 'oh I don't care', but if a boy posts a photo of a girl like oh you know 'got into a relationship', there is so many likes on it, people are like 'aaw!'

In Irene's story we can see again the porous boundaries of the couple form whose public displays of affection facilitate multiple audience identifications. Irene and her friend's jokey exclamations of revulsion at the couple's 'lovey dovey' posts further highlight the ambivalent nature of intimacy, which can affect or be affected in multi-directional ways

(Berlant 1998). The feelings conveyed in these posts are not bounded with the couple, but have a permeable influence on the surrounding friendship group. Rather than alienating Irene, her friend's performance of 'lovey dovey' romance becomes a scene of connection with and between Irene's friendship group through their gentle mockery of the couple.

The comment also refers to the gendered politics of digital romance. The indifference Irene perceives when a girl posts a relationship selfie with her boyfriend is contrasted with the value boys accrue through 'likes' and comments on similar posts. This shift in the regime of attention points to the changing gender dynamics of romantic practices. Perceived as something girls and women have more investment in, romance and its emotional attachments are typically coded as feminine. However, scholars have explored how romance is becoming a resource for young men to reflect a new heterosexual masculinity in response to social contexts where sensitive and emotionally articulate masculinities are increasingly expected (Allen 2007).

Rather than indicating more equitable gendered power relations, such expressions of romance can bolster dominant heterosexual practices that reinforce gendered hierarchies (Allen, 2007). Conveying one's success with girls and women are key resources in the construction of heteronormative masculinities (Allen 2007; Harvey and Ringrose 2015). However, Allen (2007, p. 146) notes that successfully levying romantic masculinity to bolster one's status requires a balancing act with not appearing 'too romantic'. In practice engaging in romantic displays online was fraught with tension and anxiety. For example, Claire (age 17, pronouns she/her, Westland College) shared the following story in response to Irene's comment:

Claire: But I think it can come back to haunt you, cos like I know somebody who was in a relationship and he thought they were gonna like get married so he wrote like paragraphs every day to her, like little love poems, and they broke up like 3 weeks ago

Irene / Bernard: Oooh

Claire: And now that's online forever

Claire's story highlights the precarity of coupledness along with the vulnerabilities of enthusiastically investing in traditional discourses of love, commitment and imagined heteronormative futures of marriage. Here, the failure of the relationship can 'come back to haunt you' granting them more permanency than the 'happily, ever after' fantasy of the heteronormative good life (Berlant 1998). In response participants expressed ambivalence about the publicisation of their own and peer's intimate relationships online as the couple form is plagued by a latent instability. The visibility of break-ups online not only publicized the precarity of intimacy but was subjected to the moralising gaze of peers. For example, it was suggested that if your relationship status changes regularly 'you've got a problem with you' (Bernard's words) and that it is more acceptable to signal one's relationship status if it is 'a long, long term relationship' or you are 'getting married' (Irene's words). Echoing Naezer and Ringrose (2018), we can see here the investment in specific types of serious, committed and 'mature' sexual practices tied to heteronormative imaginaries. In contrast the brevity of young couplings and their publicisation through social media was coded as naïve, 'excessive' and at times pathological (Abidin 2016).

Siri! Tell me a love story

Romantic relationships were also a topic of conversation amongst the younger participants in my study. At Ysgol Mellt, Aislinn, Neve, Natalie (all aged 11 years old, pronouns she/her) and Leah (aged 13, pronouns she/her) spoke often of desiring and dating boys at their school (Allen 2015; Renold 2013). Entry into hetero-romantic relationships has been taken as disturbing evidence of 'premature' sexualisation by white middle-class moral panics surrounding childhood innocence (Allen 2015; Huuki and Renold 2016). However, research has found that boyfriend-girlfriend relationships are not only prevalent in children and young people's social worlds but experienced in locally and culturally specific ways (Renold 2013; Renold 2005). Renold and Ivinson (2015, p. 241) detail how the push to couple up in schools such as Ysgol Mellt should be understood within the context of its south Wales' post-industrial landscape where 'serving the institution of heterosexuality as girlfriend, wife and mother operated historically as a way of saving and securing a socio-historical hegemonic masculinity that in many ways operated as community survival' (see also Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012; Renold and Ringrose 2017).

The relationship talk at Ysgol Mellt contrasted with the more affluent setting of Green City School in England where Mia, Isabella, Safa, Imogen and Chiara (all aged 11 – 12 years old, pronouns she/her) expressed an overt rejection of (hetero)sexualised dating culture. The following excerpt from a group interview offers a rare instance in which talk of crushes came up:

Isabella: We asked Alexa who she had a crush on and she said R2D2

Kate: Do you talk about crushes in your year? Do people...

Isabella: No!

Everyone: Nooo

Isabella: Well the populars do

In this exchange the group were quick to shut down my question about whether they discussed crushes, answering with a loud and resounding 'no!' While the assertion that 'the populars' talk about crushes suggests that participating in romantic dating rituals was associated with higher social status at Green City School (Renold 2005), Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen consistently dismissed or trivialized the topic. For example, in one interview Safa told me how she had sent a YouTube video on 'How to Talk to Your Crush' to their Whatsapp group chat but asserted that she thought it would 'just be really funny just to laugh at!' and whispered to me 'I don't have crushes'. I was therefore curious to hear how the practice of discussing crushes came up in the questions they posed to the virtual personal assistant Alexa. This can be seen as another jocular way of broaching the topic of

pre-teen desire but it also poses questions about the role of artificial intelligence in children and young people's emerging gender and sexual subjectivities.

The home is often positioned as the true and proper site for children and young people's sexuality education by a 'hetero-patriarchal framework of privatized intimacy, boxed and bounded within families' (Dobson, Robards and Carah 2019, p. 7). However, the advent of virtual personal assistants like Alexa indicate how family life is becoming increasingly digitally-networked. The technological shift towards 'smart homes' whereby everyday domestic appliances are connected to the internet and controlled through voice interaction (Schiller and McMahon 2019), raises a potential challenge to the sanctity of the hetero-patriarchal family form. For example, stories abound of smart devices recording private family conversations and sharing them with phonebook contacts (Wolfson 2018). In addition to infringing on the privacy of family life, the above extract illuminates how children and young people can develop a sense of intimate companionship with these smart technologies. For example, Safa also shared how the Apple virtual personal assistant Siri had told her 'a love story'. Consequently, Alexa and Siri can be seen to be taking on familiar intimate roles of friendly confidant and parental story-teller.

Virtual personal assistants are predominantly given feminine names, identities and voices, which has been linked to the socio-cultural association of femininity with subservience and subordination (Manton 2018). Prominent adverts for Alexa centre on its ability to aide fathers in their childcare responsibilities towards their daughters while mothers are notably absent (see Joint London 2019a; 2019b; 2019c; 2016). Rather than offering technological liberation from oppressive gendered divisions of labour through domestic automation, however, domesticity and childcare remains tethered to a docile and compliant feminine figure that operates as a housewife 2.0 (Schiller and McMahon 2019; Jarrett 2015). Furthermore, in one advert entitled 'Dad's Day' a working mother appears to have dutifully pre-programmed Amazon Echo to remind her partner what to do on his 'day' at home (Joint London 2019a).

The advent of domestic smart devices like Alexa and Siri are indicative of the ways in which heteronormative fantasies of the good life are being reconfigured. These devices

simultaneously trouble the hetero-patriarchal framework of family life as a private, intimate sphere, and reify gendered divisions of labour. They are indicative of 'surveillance capitalism' where large multinational technology companies aim to 'predict and modify human behaviour as a means to produce revenue and market control' (Zuboff 2015, p. 75). Concerns about the contaminating influence of digital technologies on children and young people tend to focus on spaces shared with peers and how they loosen the grip that families and institutions have over children's sexual and gendered becomings (Etheridge 2016). However, Mia, Isabella, Safa and Imogen's story of engaging Alexa in relationship talk exemplifies how domestic smart devices can become entangled in their intimate lives.

'I don't know what's normal anymore': Fraying fantasies of The Good Life

The dispersal of digital technologies into our everyday intimate lives appears to have foregrounded a neo-liberal enterprising and entrepreneurial approach to intimacy. However, neo-liberalism has also sabotaged many of modernity's secure institutions of intimacy and reciprocity that made the promises of 'upward mobility, job security, political and social equality and lively, durable intimacy' achievable (Berlant 2011, p. 3). The hetero-patriarchal 'good life' bears less and less relation to how people can and do live (Mercer et al. 2013). This was highlighted during the following interview with Karma (aged 13, pronouns he/him) and Droshux (aged 13, pronouns he/him) at Green City School:

Karma: ...Do you think the government is watching you through this? (*points to the camera on my laptop*)

Kate: Sometimes I worry, yeah

(*Karma laughs*)

Kate: Do you think they are?

Karma: No I don't think it's true, why would they spy on you? Out of all the people, why you? Why do you matter? Well not saying that you don't matter

Kate: Ha thanks

Droshux: What's so special

Karma: What would the government have on you?

Droshux: Who is spying on you?

Karma: Your webcam

Kate: Sometimes they can access these things

Karma: Yeah but it's like, why, why would you [...] there's nothing you've committed, you don't have a criminal record I don't think

Kate: No

Karma: You're just a university student, I mean

Kate: Yeah

Karma: Nothing is abnormal about your life, not saying it is normal. No one's life is normal

Droshux: I mean how do you know, you don't know much

Karma: Define normal

Droshux: Exactly

Karma: Is normal buying a house? Having lovely kids? Getting a nice wife?

Kate: What do you think?

Karma: I don't know. I don't know what's normal anymore

In this discussion, Karma points to an enduring orientation towards the promises of the hetero-patriarchal 'good life' of 'buying a house', 'having lovely kids' and 'getting a nice wife' at the same time as placing question marks over them as indicators of normality. These life plots are further que(e)ried by the openness of his questions and my uncertainty at the time as to whether they were addressed to me. In my lifetime lesbians like myself have been granted the 'right' to accrue signifiers of the good life such as 'a nice wife', 'lovely kids' and 'a house'.² However, marriage, child-rearing and home-ownership are proving increasingly unattainable and/or undesirable 'life choices' in the context of precarious employment and spiralling house costs (Mercer et al. 2013). Furthermore, Karma's questions are premised on an awareness of the potential vulnerability of the family sphere to intrusion by our technological devices. Consequently, Karma's questions bring into sharp relief the fading coordinates of the good life fantasy in favour of a mounting sense of contingency, unpredictability and technological surveillance.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with the complexities and ambivalences of young people's digital intimacies. By weaving together data generated in interviews with twenty-five young people aged 11 – 18 years old in England and Wales, I illustrated how fantasies of the heteronormative good life continue to powerfully structure young people's intimate lives as well as examined some of the ways that the good life is unsettled and reconfigured by young people's digital practices. Widespread social anxieties over the corrupting influence of digital technologies on young people achieving a healthy (hetero)sexuality tie into concerns over the fraying fantasies of the good life where lively, durable intimacy has less traction in the world (Berlant 2011). While these anxieties have informed efforts to block and curtail young people's digital engagements, the findings in this paper point to the limits of this approach.

Firstly, I illustrated how Instagram and YouTube facilitate the marketisation of coupledness, family life, LGBTQ+ relationships and feminist sex advice which offer fluctuating and multiple sexual meanings, values and norms. Rather than defining whether particular

² As Skeggs pointed out in an interview with Berlant, this fantasy has always been unstable for working-class people and it is the middle-classes who are most affected by the destabilization of social mobility and aspiration (Taylor 2012).

content was 'good' or 'bad' for young people's emerging sexual and gender subjectivities, I illustrated that their influence was not straightforward (Allen 2015). For example, The Ingham Family appear to promote the rewards of hetero-familial life at the same time as corrupting the notion of the private family home as the ideal primary source of intimacy. Similarly, LGBTQ+ YouTube celebrities may stabilise rather than challenge heteronormative institutions of monogamy, marriage and domesticity. Further research is needed to explore young people's diverse digital media engagements and how they shape imaginative possibilities for future relations.

Secondly, I demonstrated how the publicisation of intimate relationships amongst peers on social media promoted coupledness as the pinnacle of relational success. Despite the focus on exclusivity and privacy these public displays of affection were profoundly social and had a permeable influence on the surrounding peer group. This visibility ultimately worked to promote the inherent precarity of heteronormative future imaginaries by illuminating their failure and transient nature. These findings highlight the limits of focusing on young people's rational, individual decision-making at the expense of addressing the fundamental sociality of digital platforms that blur the boundary between the personal and the networked (Chun and Friedland 2015).

Finally, I observed how virtual personal assistants in the home can become entangled in young people's intimate practices in curious ways. Concerns about young people's digital intimacies tend to focus on spaces shared with peers and how they loosen the grip that families and institutions have over children's development (Etheridge 2016). However, this overlooks how domestic smart technologies are also encoded with gendered and sexual meanings. I argue that further research is needed into children and young people's relationship to these technologies, particularly from a perspective that considers how they reproduce, challenge and subvert the gender and sexual norms embedded in these technologies. Overall, by better understanding the complexity of young people's digital intimacies, practitioners may be better positioned to create safe, open and exploratory contexts that enable young people to navigate contemporary digital relationships and sexuality issues.

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