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**The importance of belonging – a study of young people’s online communication in a Swedish context**

**Purpose**
The aim of the study presented in this session is to deepen the knowledge about young peoples’ communication in social media by focusing on positioning processes in their online interactions. Online communication has become an important arena constituting everyday practice for young people. Smart phones and mobile Internet have been of great importance for the development of interactions in social media. For example, in a survey conducted by Swedish Media Council\(^1\) 2017, 75 percent of 12-15 year old Swedish students are found to be daily users (ibid). An American survey from 2015 reports that 88 % of American teenagers have access to smartphones and 90 % of these exchange texts. A typical American teen sends and receives 30 texts per day (Pew Research Center\(^2\), 2017). This technology gives young people many possibilities to interact beyond time and space. Online spaces can from this perspective be regarded as more equal than offline spaces. Irrespective of background, people can be brought together around mutual interests (boyd and Ellison, 2008).

But, for many young people adolescence is a time of turbulence, in which establishing social affiliations is an important element. Struggles about power, about popularity and status are key aspects, which include both inclusive and exclusive processes. Context-bounded expectations to act according to social norms are developed both in the class and in school as a whole, which follow into online interactions. A lot of examples of both possibilities and restrictions for being a young person, a girl or a boy, become visible online (boyd, 2008; Davis, 2012; Vallor, 2012). Certain identities are placed in the center while others are marginalized and by the youths’ acts both normality and deviation are constructed (Kumashiro, 2002).

The students in this study are not categorized as solely boys or girls. Behind the gender category there are other categories that affect their position in the peer group and the power to act, both offline and online. The endeavor is to uncover the relation between the students’ multiple identities and their acting space online. From the students’ point of view, this study asks the question:

- In what ways are the students’ acting spaces online affected by their position in the peer group?

**Theoretical framework**
In this study, focus is put on positioning processes highlighted in the students’ argumentation about their online interactions. The students actively use language to interpret the world, both offline and online, and depending on how language is used different discourses are developed in the social practice. (Foucault, 1972; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). There is a relation between discourses and power, and with the concept ‘regime of truth’ Foucault (1972) points out that power is created and embodied by discourses and in this way the discourses are allowed to rule the understanding of the world (ibid). It can also be verbalized as the world is interpreted through the

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1 Swedish Media Council is a knowledge center that investigates the media habits of children and youth. They conduct yearly studies on youths’ experiences and attitudes toward the use of different media (Statens Medieråd, 2017).
2 Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan fact tank based in Washington (Pew Research Center, 2017)
discursive patterns the students are exposed to. In this way, discourses condition both the constitution of the subject and the structures in society as a whole. Structures exert power and contribute to keep the social practice in order (Foucault, 1972; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). By their acts ‘normality’ is constructed and according to Kumashiro (2002) otherness and deviation are known and maintained only by inference, often in contrast to the norm (ibid). This is a question of inclusion and exclusion, leading to both inequality and social stratification. Normalization processes concerns how certain identities become naturalized while others are unthinkable, for example on the basis of gender, sexual orientation or disability. Instead of looking at power relations as dichotomous and binary in which different groups appear as antagonistic, this study has an intersectional point of departure (Crenshaw, 1995; Foucault, 1972; Kumashiro, 2002).

Data material and analysis process
The empirical data is based on observations and interviews and are collected in two classes in two separated schools situated in a medium-sized city in Sweden. In one class 12 youths (4 boys and 8 girls) of 23 from Grade 8 (15 years) participated. In the other class 20 youths of 24 (9 boys and 11 girls) from Grade 7 participated. Altogether there were 13 boys and 19 girls taking part in the study. Before the interviews I attended each class as an observer for approximately 40 hours in order to get to know the students as individuals, but also to get an insight into their reciprocal friendships. The majority of interviews were designed in pairs, and the time for all interviews totaled 12 hours and 38 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, which means that a list of questions and topics were constructed that had to be covered during the interviews (Bryman, 2016). The endeavor was to give the students a voice by letting them, as freely as possible, describe their experiences of interacting in social media. My task, as a researcher, was to ask follow-up questions when needed to get a deeper understanding. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

A hermeneutic interpretation process formed the basis for the analysis process. The analysis began with a reading of the empirical data to get an overall understanding. Thereafter the data was thematized based on patterns found by reading through all the text several times. By connecting theoretical perspectives to the data, the understanding of themes and patterns deepened (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004).

Results
This study shed light on inequalities in students’ acting spaces online, contributing with perspectives of positioning processes in young people’s everyday lives. The results show that the online arena works as a leisure center for most of the students. There are social norms and rules connected to the online arena, irrespective who you are, which are important to be familiar with. But, there are also normative expectations, connected to different social categories in the peer group, which also affect the acting space online. Both aspects are central in order to be successful in the peer group.

On one hand all students in this study are constructed as part of the same category. They are young people in Grade 7 or 8 interacting in social media, but on the other hand they also are constructed in different ways in the same category. The students belong to different peer groups in school and their social identities are constructed in relation to how they identify themselves as a member or not a member of these groups. There are normative expectations depending on group membership, for example what kinds of
photos that can be published without risking being insulted online. ‘Horse girls’ publish photos when they jump with their horses and ‘skate boarders’ publish nice moves when they skate. These students do not publish photos exhibiting their body. Some students are regarded as ‘geeks’ with weak social affiliations and they are closed out from social media. Being online is dangerous for them. No one will protect them if someone is mean.

Gender is another aspect that affects the students’ acting space online. To be an appropriate boy or girl that is accepted and respected by peers, it is important to act in accordance with the prevailing order in the specific context, but also according to the general expectations in society. It appears that successful boys are controlled, and they are acting online in accordance with appropriate masculinity. Mostly, the boys are ‘doers’; they publish photos where they act in contrast to girls who publish photos objectifying their body. Related to the hierarchical order between men and women boys and girls have different access to each other’s acting space. It is easier for girls to use the boys’ acting space, for example publishing photos when they are acting. The opposite condition prevails for most of the boys. There is a danger for boys publishing photos where they are exposing their body, since there is a great risk of being insulted.

At the same time as there is a struggle about power related to gender and group membership, processes are also taking place, that derive from other positioning processes, in this case sexuality. It appears that it is very shameful for the boys to be looked upon as a faggot. ‘Doing’ masculinity does not relate to being homosexual. This means that boys who actively use markers to show their hetero-normativity and masculinity are more likely to be marked as real men/boys. It can also be expressed as this kind of intertwining between sexuality and gender gains hegemony in the peer group (and in society), which comes with less risk of being insulted online. Thus, this intertwining is loaded with sufficient power to guard normality in the peer group. In contrast to boys, girls in general do not need to prove their hetero-normativity in their online interactions. Instead, they need to be aware of the prevailing view upon girls’/women’s sexuality. This opinion is common in the girls’ statements in this study. They use the word ‘slut’ when they describe some girls in school and what kind of photos they publish (photos where they exhibit their body). These girls risk to get negative comments.

But, the analysis also shows that some positions in the peer group are loaded with adequate power and possibility to challenge the intertwining between gender and sexuality. The more status the more power to challenge normative boundaries. Some girls in school are popular, especially among boys, and they have the power to act in a norm-breaching way without risking being insulted online. If a girl publishes provocative photos without being abused, the power to act online is reinforced. On the contrary, these girls get positive comments and even higher status. Some peer groups’ positions among boys are also loaded with power and can challenge the prevailing order of how to be a proper boy/man without risking being called a faggot. These boys can publish female-coded photos, such as objectifying their bodies, without being abused.

To conclude, the processes of belonging are complex, dynamic, and power-loaded phenomena. The students act from their social position, in terms of expectation based on their position in their peer group and fear of reprisals. The intersection between gender, sexuality, group membership and status between groups give the students different positions to act online. There is an ongoing and constant negotiation in which the
students have lots of reference points to take into account in order to be an appropriate and accepted young person.

References


