Young people's sharing of sexualized digital imagery: Processes of acceleration in human-technology interactions

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Abstract

The ubiquity of smartphones and social media has introduced new ways of being connected and engaged in digitally mediated spaces, including the possibilities of exchanging private sexualized digital imagery – a practice known as 'sexting'. In this paper, we study the ways in which young people's engagement in both consensual and non-consensual sexting practices is facilitated – and sometimes even accelerated – by technology. Our study is based on focus group interviews with young people aged 16-21, 6 months of digital ethnography on social and digital media, and posts concerning sexting written by young people on Danish counselling websites. We draw on perspectives from postphenomenology and new materialism in order to focus on human-technology interactions and how digital technologies shape social processes and interactions when young people exchange sexualized digital images and videos. We attend to the ways the affordances of social media (e.g., spreadability, ephemerality and persistence) facilitate and mediate young people's sharing of sexualized imagery and how the affects emerging through these processes produce intensities, fantasies and intimacies, which both motivate and accelerate these practices. Our analyses seek to refine current understandings of young people's production and sharing of sexualized digital imagery. Moreover, we argue that there is a need for further development of psychological concepts and analyses that can adequately grasp the nuances of the complex digital and visual intimate, social, sexual processes of young people's lives and advance the research field of sexting among young people.

Keywords: sexting, intimacy, technological affordances, affects, youth

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the human-technology interactions involved in young people's sharing of sexualized digital imagery. Such practices take many forms (Mandau, 2020a; Rasmussen & Søndergaard, 2020), but can be broadly divided into two categories: consensual practices and non-consensual practices. Consensual sharing practices involve situations where young people have agreed on the production and exchange of sexual images and videos (Powell & Henry, 2014), while non-consensual practices describe situations where this agreement has been disrupted and the imagery is distributed to a wider audience. Non-consensual practices are also described with names such as "revenge porn" or "non-consensual porn", although several scholars have argued that the term "image-based sexual abuse" is a more precise term for describing non-consensual uses of sexualized imagery (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2017; McGlynn & Rackley, 2017).

In order to explore how digital technologies shape the social processes and interactions involved when sexualized digital imagery is produced, sent, received and forwarded, we draw on theoretical perspectives from postphenomenology (Verbeek, 2005) and new materialism (Barad, 2007; Søndergaard, 2013). These theoretical perspectives are particularly relevant for analyzing the interactions between young people and technology, as they both aim to move beyond focusing solely on individual human intentions and motivations. Instead, they share an understanding of the world as co-shaped by both human and non-human actors. Although they differ in their epistemological and ontological assumptions[1], they share an ambition of not only identifying phenomena in the world, but also of exploring how these phenomena come to matter in ongoing becomings of the world (Barad, 2007; Verbeek, 2005). Our ambition is to move beyond identifying and describing the character of the affordances and affects in the human-technology interactions involved in the sharing of sexualized digital imagery. We include media scholars, who have already done so (e.g. Boyd (2011) or Paasonen (2005)), and use their concepts to analyze how the affordances and affects constitute psychological dynamics that facilitate and accelerate the sharing of sexualized digital imagery in the lives of young people. As such, the post-phenomenological and new materialist perspectives seem particularly relevant for this purpose.

Previous research on sexting

The pervasiveness of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery has been established by numerous quantitative studies (see for example: Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson, & Svedin, 2016; Kosenko, Luurs, & Binder, 2017). A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of multiple forms of sexting behaviors among young people aged 12-17 showed that the mean prevalence[2] of sending sexts was 14.8%, the mean prevalence of receiving sexts was 27.4% and the mean prevalence of forwarding sexts without consent

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[1] Barad (2007), for example, replaces the concept of interaction with *intra-action*, as she teaches us that phenomena are entangled and intra-active material-discursive forces, not only encountering and affecting each other, but mutually transforming and entangling in ways that produce new phenomena in ongoing processes and movements.

[2] The meta-analysis included studies, reporting on one or more acts of sending, receiving, or forwarding sexts without consent or having one's sext forwarded without consent, and they included both sexually explicit images, videos, and/or messages (Madigan et al, 2018).

was 8.4% (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel, & Temple, 2018). However, the findings of individual studies tend to vary, which makes it difficult to get a consistent and reliable overview of the prevalence of such practices. According to some scholars, these variations are also due to the complexity of the practices and inconsistency in the terminology used (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013). Some studies include for example only sexualized images in their definition of sexting (see for example: Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014), while others also include sexualized text messages (see for example: Houck et al., 2041).

While quantitative studies provide knowledge regarding the prevalence of sexting and associated sexual behaviors, attitudes, and motivations among young people, a growing body of qualitative research has contributed with more in-depth investigations of the complexity of these practices (Anastassiou, 2017). Many qualitative studies have been concerned with the risks and problems associated with young people's sexualized digital practices (see for example Frankel, Bass, Patterson, Dai, and Brown (2018), Ahern and Mechling (2013) or Smith, Thompson, and Davidson (2014)). These perspectives are indeed important; however, they are not particularly helpful in understanding the dynamics of facilitation and acceleration through which young people's practices may become risky and problematic.

In this article, we position ourselves among the few studies that seek to analyze how technology influences young people's sexualized social processes and communicative interactions (e.g., Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Kofoed and Larsen, 2016). These studies focus on the social media app 'Snapchat' and emphasize how the ephemerality of images and messages shared on this app effects a sense of intimacy among young people, which inclines them to exchange images of self-disclosure, e.g., ugly or sexualized selfies (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Kofoed and Larsen, 2016). Although we focus on the sharing of sexualized imagery across different digital media and platforms and not just Snapchat, the analyses of the entanglements of technological affordances and affects in these two studies are particularly helpful in understanding some of the meanings and matters of human-technology interactions, including the ways in which technologies facilitate and accelerate these practices.

Method and ethics

Our research material consists of 13 focus group interviews with young people aged 16-21, as well as six months of digital ethnography on different digital media and online platforms. The interviews were conducted in Denmark with students from a vocational school and two high schools (27 boys and 20 girls), who were divided into same-sex groups of 3-5 persons. The interviews were centered on the students' everyday engagement in sexualized digital practices involving imagery, as well as their thoughts and engagement in cases where such practices took more abusive forms. Digital ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2011, 2015; Hine, Kendall, & Boyd, 2009; Markham, 2013; Markham & Gammelby, 2018) was used to access media where sexualized imagery was posted and exchanged as part of young people's mundane sexualized digital practices (e.g., Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat) but also drives and sites hosting more systematic collections and exchanges of imagery (e.g., Dropboxes, Discord servers, bulletin and image boards). This resulted in approximately 300 screenshots of images; user stories and experiences; forms of communications such as likes, comments and discussions; community features; online texts; notes about the technological architecture of the various social and digital media, their designs, implied affordances and

the behavior they effected. In addition, we also collected data from anonymous Danish counselling websites (e.g., www.bornetelefonen.dk), where children and young people can ask for advice and support on a wide range of issues, including sexuality and intimate relations. This part of the collected data consisted of anonymous posts written by children and adolescents, in which they described their experiences of situations and dilemmas revolving around the production and sharing of private sexualized images.

Young people's sharing of sexualized digital imagery is a field drenched in dilemmas. On the one hand, these practices are part of young people's mundane digital interactions; on the other hand, they sometimes take more abusive and even illegal forms that involve imagery depicting young people, who are unaware that their image is being circulated digitally. These circumstances challenge some of the general ethical research principles regarding informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and minimizing harm to those involved. Our ethical considerations were therefore inspired by the re-conceptualizing of 'care' by Martin, Myers, and Viseu (2015) and Søndergaard (2019), which redirects our attention from exclusively considering the well-being of the individual to include a focus on the multiplicity of enacting forces that entangle when phenomena are produced. We have combined this comprehensive perspective with the general ethical principles and ethical guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR), which emphasize ethics as a range of situational contextual decisions (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). To give an example of one of many difficult decisions we made, we obtained informed consent from all interviewees, but not from the young people studied as part of our digital ethnography or from those posting on the counselling sites. Furthermore, we reported systematic criminal activities that we encountered online to the relevant authorities, but not practices and situations described by the young people during the interviews, even though some of these may be considered illegal. These decisions involved numerous dilemmas, and we constantly had to weigh the well-being and protection of individuals against the importance of the research.

Analysis

The first part of the analysis takes a postphenomenological approach, focusing on how the affordances of social media shape young people's sharing of sexualized digital imagery. The second part of the analysis takes a new materialist approach and focuses on the affectivities emerging through young people's encounters with technology, exploring how the production of intensities, fantasies and intimacies accelerate young people's sharing of sexualized digital images and videos. We acknowledge that there are many other forces potentially facilitating and accelerating the exchange of sexualized imagery among young people, such as social and gendered discourses and norms, and that these forces are also entangled with some of the forces, we focus on. As many other studies have taken up a focus on the gendered and normative forces (see for example Albury (2015) or Salter (2016)), we keep our focus to the human-technology interactions, which as previously mentioned have received much less scholarly attention.

Social media affordances and sexting – a postphenomenological approach

Originally introduced by philosopher Don Ihde (1993), postphenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of technology and science that draws on concepts and analyses of embodiment, perception and tool-use from the continental phenomenological tradition, while revising some of its conceptions of technology (Rosenberger & Verbeek,

2015). Philosophers and empirical researchers have continued and drawn on Ihde's postphenomenological project in studies of science and technology (Rosenberger, 2014; Verbeek, 2005; Aagaard, 2017). In contrast to the conception of technology as a uniform and dominant mode of looking at the world as usable recourses, as formulated in the later works of Martin Heidegger (1977), postphenomenology focuses on concrete technological artifacts and the ways in which they shape our perception of the world and our behavior in it (Verbeek, 2005).

A central tenet in postphenomenology is that technologies play a defining role in shaping the relations between humans and the world, and that users and technologies are mutually conditioned by each other. Technologies are conceived as 'mediating' the activities we are engaged in, meaning that they shape, delimit, expand, direct and condition our perception and behavior in specific, non-neutral ways. For example, the fact that smartphone-cameras are close at hand and ready to produce, edit and share pictures online instantaneously considerably broadens the scope of what can be photographed compared to the time of analog cameras. Because we do not have to worry about running out of film or having to pay for developing photos when using a smartphone, we become inclined to take pictures more often. Moreover, practices of picture sharing involve a far bigger audience on social media applications such as Instagram, compared to the time when private photos were mainly collected in physical albums. According to the postphenomenological approach, technological devices such smartphones are therefore not simply neutral instruments to be manipulated by a rational subject, who singlehandedly determines their use. Instead, these devices shape our perception and direct our attention to certain aspects of reality; they allow, incline or 'invite' us to perform certain actions or practices, while discouraging others.

The concept of affordances

Drawing on the postphenomenological approach to human-technology relations allows us to explore how technological devices like the smartphone and its social media applications (e.g., Snapchat) shape young adults' sexting behavior. This approach allows us to explore the question: How do the possibilities offered by the smartphone facilitate and accelerate the sexual and communicative interactions involved in sexting? One way of approaching this question is through the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1979), which has a considerable degree of affinity with the postphenomenological notion of mediation.

Originally introduced by Gibson (1979) in his ecological approach to visual perception, the concept of affordances refers to what the environment offers to the organism – i.e., what it allows or enables it to do, depending on the organism's own constitution and abilities. To give a few examples: water affords drinking, an oven affords baking, and a cell phone affords calling or texting other people. Affordances are constituted in the interplay of organism and environment and are hence context-dependent: while a car may afford driving for an adult with a driver's license, it does not afford driving for subjects that do not know how to operate it. Building on Gibson (1979), Hutchby (2001, p. 444) defines technological affordances as "functional and relational aspects, which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object". Furthermore, Aagaard (2018) argues that the use of the affordance concept in analyses of technologies like laptops and smartphones needs to encompass the invitational character of these technologies – i.e. that affordances do not simply offer a range of possible actions, but actively invite certain actions. Taken together, the concept of technological affordances and the concept of

mediation are based on a similar understanding of technological artefacts as shaping, but not determining, the possibilities for action, based on who is using them and in what context.

In recent years, the concept of affordances has been applied within studies of social media to analyze how the features of platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat afford "new dynamics or types of communicative practices and social interactions" (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 11). In research on sexting, several scholars have drawn on danah Boyd's (2011) four social media affordances: persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability (Harvey & Ringrose, 2015; Hiestand & Weins, 2014; Walrave, Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Temple, 2018). Furthermore, studies have focused on the affordance of 'ephemerality' in Snapchat (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Kofoed, 2017) – an application where messages and videos self-destruct a few seconds after they have been opened. In the following sections, we will focus on two of danah Boyd's (2011) affordances, spreadability and persistence, and the affordance of ephemerality in Snapchat.

Spreadability and ephemerality: Accelerated processes of intimacy

When a digital image is taken on a smartphone, it is – technically – shareable with anyone who has access to the internet. By virtue of being digital, sexualized images and videos are therefore immediately shareable in ways that were impossible in the age of analog photography, when images were physically tied to a printed form. Since most young people in Western societies today are "permanently online, permanently connected" (Vorderer, Hefner, Reinecke, & Klimmt, 2017), the possibility of sharing digital images is basically ever-present. As several studies have shown (García-Gómez, 2017; Walrave et al., 2018), the possibility of taking and sharing sexual images and videos immediately, effortlessly and at a distance can facilitate positive processes of self-disclosure. Lucia O'Sullivan (2014, p. 41) has described such processes as accelerated intimacy, arguing that: "Because self-disclosure is the hallmark of intimate exchange and because we disclose far more readily using digital technologies, we often experience an accelerated process of intimacy". These accelerated processes of intimacy can take on a sexual character in the case of consensual sexting, as the following empirical examples show:

> I am a 16-year-old girl. For almost 3 months I have had a sex chat. I love it. We send pictures and videos of ourselves and touch our private parts until we come. It's so amazing! We have just begun Skyping too. I trust him, and I've begun to like him.
> **(Girl, aged 16, online post from www.bornetelefonen.dk)**

> I am a girl aged 13, I am lesbian, and I have a girlfriend aged 14. she lives in new york, so we talk on msn. maybe we are going to meet up irl [in real life] soon. anyway, we are both virgins, but we have a great desire for sex. because none of us are above the legal age and she lives in the usa, we don't have sex. However, we do have cybersex on msn; talking dirty to each other, etc. we have also sent naughty pictures to each other.
> **(Girl, aged 13, online post from www.bornetelefonen.dk)**

As the above examples show, the spreadability affordance of digital media allows for the sharing of sexualized images and videos immediately and at a distance, which can facilitate positive processes of self-disclosure and sexual intimacy.

The observation that people are more inclined to engage in processes of self-disclosure when communicating through digital media was conceptualized by John Suler (2004) in his

psychoanalytically oriented notion of "the online disinhibition effect". While Suler's concept centered on textual communication, the online disinhibition effect can also be identified in image-sharing applications used for sexting (Walrave et al., 2018). This is particularly clear in the case of Snapchat and its ephemerality affordance, which can facilitate sexting in characteristic ways. Because Snapchat pictures automatically evaporate after the sender opens them, it can incline or encourage users to send images with more risqué and sexually explicit content, compared to applications, where images do not disappear by default. The following excerpts from focus group interviews provide examples of how young people understand the role of Snapchat's ephemerality affordance in sexting:

> **Robert:** You just feel to a much lesser extent that it's, like, out there, because on Instagram it's on the wall, you know, everybody…
> **Simon** [interrupting]: Yes, yes, exactly
> **Robert:** There, it's just like, after ten seconds it doesn't exist anymore
> **Simon:** I think you feel a lot safer on Snapchat

And in a focus group interview with a group of girls:

> **Laura**: I think that with regards to Snapchat, it has just become such an easy medium to send these pictures on, because they disappear so rapidly (…)
> **Sandra**: It's basically the easiest and, like, the one with the least confrontation involved because the picture is [interrupts herself] In any case, you can't see that it has been sent afterwards, like, in contrast to a Facebook-chat where you can scroll up and see it anytime
> **Emma**: Yes, then you're reminded of it all the time
> **Laura**: Yes, exactly, because it disappears on Snapchat

The feeling of sexualized images being 'out there' in the space of social media is thus conditioned by the image's digital existence: it is less socially 'binding' to send a disappearing image than a permanent one. Similar to what has been found in studies on the applications used in sexting (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters, 2017), this shows how young adults view Snapchat as an application that feels 'safer' than other applications used for sexting. By virtue of the disinhibiting effects of its ephemerality affordance, Snapchat therefore not only enables, but also accelerates the sending of self-produced sexually explicit material. This is also supported by studies showing that Snapchat is a popular application among adolescents and young adults for sending sexually explicit images (Moran, Salerno, & Wade, 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2017; Yockey, King, Vidourek, Burbage, & Merianos, 2019).

These findings can be understood by returning to the point made by Aagaard (2018) who argues that the affordances of technologies like laptops and smartphones also implies an invitational character – i.e. that affordances do not simply offer a range of possible actions, but actively invite certain actions. To rephrase the point made above, we can say that Snapchat not only enables, but also invites or inclines its users to produce and send images with a more risqué content, compared to other social media applications.

Dialectic affordances: The acceleration of non-consensual image sharing

While the affordance of spreadability can facilitate positive instances of sexual intimacy, it can also be used in highly problematic ways. The spreadable nature of digital media content

makes it possible to share with third parties, which in turn makes it difficult, if not impossible, to remove again. As described by Van Dijck (2008, p. 68) in his notion of distributed storage: "Personal 'live' pictures distributed via the internet may remain there for life, turning up in unforeseen contexts, reframed and repurposed". Thus, the affordance of persistence is closely related to the affordance of spreadability, since pictures become persistent not by being located in concrete physical spaces, but by virtue of their digital spreadability. Despite the fact that Snapchat images are characterized by their ephemerality, the possibility of 'screenshotting' them before they disappear can make them spreadable and persistent in unexpected ways, imbuing them with what Handyside and Ringrose (2017, p. 348) describe as a "fixity out of the sender's control". When this screenshot function is used to capture and distribute sexting images, it can thus accelerate processes of non-consensual image sharing, as in the following examples:

> He asked me if he could get a picture of my ass on Snapchat, and I said yes […] But he took a screenshot and showed it to his friends - including my friends - even though he had promised to delete it. Later, all the boys had it and […] they started sending it around to all of the 13-year-old boys in my town.
> **(Girl, aged 13, online post from www.bornetelefonen.dk)**

> I am a girl, who did the stupid thing of sending naked pictures. The people I've sent them to have forwarded them, and a lot of people have them. People have made groups on Facebook where they share naked pictures of me
> **(Girl, aged 15, online post from www.bornetelefonen.dk)**

As these excerpts illustrate, the affordances of social media platforms such as Snapchat can be employed in sexting in ways that transform consensual image-sharing practices into non-consensual ones and escalate in unforeseen ways. This reveals an intricate dialectic relationship between the social media affordances of images on Snapchat. The image evolves from being ephemeral to becoming persistent and spreadable, and by virtue of the distributed storage of digital media (Van Dijck, 2008) it attains a new form of persistence online. Although the moral and legal responsibility for disseminating sexualized images non-consensually lies with the human actors who share these pictures, the affordances of digital technologies play a central role in facilitating and accelerating these processes. In sum, a postphenomenological analysis of these affordances reveals how digital technologies mediate and accelerate young adults' sexting practices in characteristic ways.

In the following, we approach young people's sexting practices from a new materialist perspective, and explore how the concept of affect can help us to further understand these human-technology interactions.

Affects and sexualized images – a new materialist approach

New materialism, as Karen Barad (2007) formulates it, especially emphasizes the entanglement of multiple human and non-human phenomena in the ongoing becoming of the world (Barad, 2007; Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011; Søndergaard, 2013). Drawing on both quantum physics, in the form of the physicist Niels Bohr, and social sciences, in the form of the philosopher Michel Foucault, as well as gender scholars such as Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, Barad expands on insights provided by poststructuralist perspectives on the performativity of the social to also include non-discursive components (Juelskjær,

Staunæs, & Ratner, 2013). Whether technological devices or affects, Barad understands phenomena not as individual entities, but ontologically indeterminate entangled material-discursive agencies that not only *encounter* and affect each other, but *mutually saturate, transform* and *entangle* in ways that produce new phenomena in ongoing processes and movements (Barad, 2007, p. 33). As such, discursive and material phenomena are always produced through their mutual and simultaneous intra-actions, while at the same time being part of new intra-actions (Barad, 2007, pp. 224-225).

Affects seem to be particularly important forces in young people's sexualized digital practices. The intensities, fantasies and intimacies that are produced as young people encounter sexualized imagery through digital technologies both facilitate and accelerate the sharing of these images and videos. Employing a new materialist perspective to study these practices allows us to analyze the messy complexities these affects are part of in the human-technology interactions. Following Anderson (2014), our interest centers on what the affects *do* through these entanglements – through the encounters between the young people, the technology and the sexual images and videos and how they lead to various kinds of engagement – rather than studying the charater of affects.

The concept of affect drawn upon in this study is therefore not to be confused with the traditional psychological and psychoanalytical concepts of emotions or feelings as something personal located in the individual. Instead, we draw on the understanding of affects formulated by feminist media scholars (Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015b; Liljeström & Paasonen, 2010), who conceptualize affects as forces emerging through and in-between relationships of agentic bodies – human, non-human, animal, individual, collective, linguistic, and social, as well as bodies of thought (Hillis, Paasonen, & Petit, 2015a). It is a move beyond the individual and personal – from the body to matter and from the psychic to the social (Koivunen, 2010) – and to understanding affects as non-subjective and impersonal potentialities and intensities that cannot be attributed to any particular bodies or objects. Still, it is not an attempt to ignore individual feelings or emotions, but to consider how these are produced – and producing – through entanglements with other phenomena.

Affects in digital spaces

A group of digital media scholars express in their book 'Networked Affects' how "the fluctuating and altering dynamics of affect give shape to online connections and disconnections, to the proximities and distances of love, desire and wanting between and among different bodies..." (Hillis et al., 2015b, p. 1). They argue that cultural practices of production, distribution and consumption rely on the internet and are underpinned by forms of intensity that generate and circulate within networks comprising both human and non-human actors. It is a way of addressing affect as an active dynamic or relation that orients interpretation and moves readers, viewers, and listeners in very physical ways (Paasonen, 2011). These affects consist of undefined intensities, of fantasies about who it is possible to be and become in and through digital spaces, and of desires for intimacies entailing both sexual excitement and personal connections.

Although these affects emerge through young people's digital practices, they still have effects in the analog world, as these 'worlds' cannot be separated. Meanwhile, the digital world is not a reflection of the analog world; according to Paasonen (2005), the digital world consists of sets of practices and narratives that have effects in the analog world. The potentialities, investments and imaginations produced in the digital world thus concern the present and possible shape of things to come (Hillis et al., 2015a) – and the fantasies

produced in and through the digital world do not represent unlimited freedoms of imagination. Instead, these fantasies refer to acts of performative production – for the young people sexting, the production of intensities and intimacies.

Intensities, fantasies and intimacies: "It is more exciting if it is someone you know"

Our empirical material shows that young people's interest and engagement in sexualized digital imagery are accelerated if the imagery produces intensities, initiates fantasies and provides a sense of intimacy. These affective processes seem to be increased if the pictures depict someone to whom the young people have a connection. This connection may differ in strength, but even the slightest recognizable cue or signal can provide a sense of connection to the girl. In one of the focus groups, the boys explain the importance of this personal connection:

> **Interviewer:** What is that about? Why do you have to know the girls? Why is that so important? Sometimes I wonder why young people don't just find these images on Google?
> **Ulrich:** Yeah, I mean… If you want sexual arousal, you can just search for porn and….
> **Oscar:** But it is personal in another way if you have…
> **Michael:** I just think it is a bit more fun.
> **Oscar:** It is more exciting if the images are of someone you know compared to someone you don't know.
> **Ulrich:** - then you might have a chance to see her or something.
> **Interviewer:** Okay. So there is some kind of potential embedded in images of girls where you have a connection?
> **Ulrich:** It will 100% always be more exciting if you know them in the real world. It definitely will!

The boys emphasize the difference between random sexualized images found on Google and sexting images portraying someone to whom they have a connection. Hence, the boys do not solely desire sexual excitement, because "then you can just search for porn". They instead emphasize the importance of a personal connection to the girl depicted in such imagery as such connections initiate a fantasy that extends beyond the digital world – and gives them a sense of intimacy. Elsewhere, Mandau (2020b) finds that young adults experience increased interest and engagement in private sexual images as these images are easier to relate to because they depict real-life situations, whereas commercial pornography mostly depicts idealized bodies and situations. This point is confirmed by some of the young people in this study, who emphasize that porn often depicts adults having sex, making it less relevant for young people.

Time and space are interesting phenomena in such processes, as the affects and intensities emerge through the technological instability of time and space and enable a sense of intimacy that the boys do not experience through random sexualized images. Moreover, the boys describe how the potential of seeing the girls in the flesh is embedded in imagery of girls they have a connection to, which produces a sense of intimacy. Later in the interview, one of the boys, Ulrich, elaborated on his thoughts about this:

> If, for example, you entered a porn site or something like that, a lot of different material will appear – A LOT of different material, and you have no idea who they are. But if it is someone you have talked to, and that you know, you can look that person in the eyes afterwards… If there is chance to have a relationship, it is definitely more exciting.

He expresses that it is not only the potential of seeing the girl in flesh, but also the potential of having a relationship with the girl, he has encountered in the digital spaces that excites him. Perhaps, the existence of the girl becomes more 'real' if he is able to encounter her in the analog world. Nevertheless, this potential of seeing her seems to produce a sense of intimacy instead of consumption that enact Ulrich's increased engagement in the imagery. Some of the same dynamics were found during the digital ethnography, where someone expresses the following during a semi-public discussion dedicated to the sharing of non-consensual sexualized imagery:

> I found this [website]. There are quite a lot of Danish and Nordic babes. I found 5 from Copenhagen in there, and one of them lives on my street, so the next time I see her, I will enjoy it even more now that I have seen her naked.

Paasonen (2005) taught us that these fantasies are not unlimited freedoms of imagination (p. 6). The fantasies and intimacies produced through the boys' encounters with naked girls online are based on the potentiality of actualizing these fantasies – and although they have not encountered the girls physically (yet), the potentialities still have effects in the analog world. The boys describe, for example, how imagery of someone they know moves them in physical ways:

> **Interviewer:** Why are images from Google not as good?
> **Steven:** You can't fantasize about that, because you have never seen the person, so you don't know who it is. It might as well have been faked on a computer.
> **Luke:** You sit there and you think to yourself: 'She is a hottie', and then it starts – the thoughts. And then you are a boy and you accidently touch your dick, and then it just goes from there.

These physical effects are dependent on the authenticity of the imagery and emphasize the boys' demand for imagery of someone to whom they have a connection. Similar dynamics were also found during the digital ethnography, where people for example would write:

> I have to have those images of girls from [town]. Honestly, I will do anything to get hold of those images.

> I don't have anything to trade with, but I would happily pay for a Dropbox with images of girls from [town].

Despite the complicated entanglement of affects in these practices, the examples illustrate how intensities, fantasies and intimacies produced through imagery of someone the boys have a connection to enact interest and engagement in various ways – especially if there is potential for real-world encounters embedded in the imagery.

Meanwhile, other parts of our research material indicate that intensities, fantasies and intimacies can also be produced through what Hillis et al. (2015a, p. 6) would call "a body of thought". Amongst other terms describing bodies, they use this term to describe and emphasize that bodies are not necessarily human, yet still have the capacity to affect and be affected. During the digital ethnography – in some of the Dropboxes and other online repositories where organized non-consensual image-sharing takes place – we found

collections of images categorized in folders according to, for instance, the girls' names, cities or schools. However, further investigation and comparison of the images and categories shows that the name of the folder is not necessarily connected to the physical person depicted in the images in the folder. Some of the images may depict the named individual or be of girls living in the city with which the folder is labelled, but others are not – and some images even appear multiple times in different folders and under different names. Although the 'person' or 'body' in the folder does not exist in that particular configuration, the young people's encounter with the images still produces a perception of intimacy and potentiality, enacting their interest and engagement.

These affective dynamics of young people, who desire intimacy and potential personal connections as they encounter sexualized digital images, may be understood through the concept of "cultural proximity" (Ksiazek & Webster, 2008), developed in the field of media and communication studies. Cultural proximity is defined as "…the tendency to prefer media products from one's own culture or the most similar possible culture" and is used to describe the connections audiences establish with bodies presented in the news. These connections can be established through a shared nationality, but also through a recognition of a specific everyday situation, and enact interest in the presented. In young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, these connections are enabled by the epistemological uncertainty in the digital spaces (Sundén, 2012) and the affordances of the digital media. Although it may seem like visual bodies are available on demand in such spaces, the intensities, fantasies and intimacies produced are not attached to the specific materiality of human bodies; young people's interest and engagement are enacted through connections and disconnections to all kinds of bodies – whether human, technological or bodies of thought.

Concluding remarks

Digitalized social and communicative processes, including the exchange of images, saturate young people's everyday lives and intimate relations. Most often, these practices are unproblematic, but sometimes they take on harrasing and abusive forms. In our study, we have explored how young people's engagement in sexualized digital imagery is not a simple matter of individual agency exercised through neutral digital technological instruments, but is enacted in complex human-technology interactions. Through perspectives from both postphenomenology and new materialism, we have argued that young people's image-sharing practices are conditioned, facilitated and, in some cases, accelerated by technological affordances of – and the affects produced through interactions with – digital media. These affordances and conditions of digital media mediate and produce the young people's sexting practices in characteristic, non-neutral ways that cannot be accounted for based on instrumentalist understandings of technology.

The postphenomenological perspective has enabled us to show how the possibility of producing and sharing sexual images and videos immediately, effortlessly and at a distance can facilitate both positive and negative processes of self-disclosure. As the examples show, what began as an ephemeral snapshot sent to a friend may be captured as a screenshot and thereby made persistent and spreadable in unexpected ways. Thus, postphenomenological theory can draw attention to the ways in which consensual and mutually rewarding processes of intimacy and self-disclosure are turned into illegitimate sharing practices involving victimization and abuse. Furthermore, the new materialist perspective has enabled us to show how the facilitation, motivation, and acceleration of young people's engagement

in sexualized digital imagery is also enacted through the affects produced in these human-technology interactions. Intensities, fantasies and intimacies are evoked and increased as young people encounter sexualized digital imagery, particularly when the young people have a sense of connection to those depicted. As the analysis shows, the emergence of these affects is dependent on the technological affordances, and may therefore also be enacted in relation to a "body of thought". The perception of an existing physical girl is supported by digital evidence, such as her name or the city she lives in, which then functions as proof of a connection to the girl, although 'she' may not exist in the analog world.

In our analyses, we have sought to refine some of the current understandings of young people's engagement in the sharing of sexualized digital imagery by focusing on how these practices are shaped by the possibilities, conditions and affordances of digital technologies. Furthermore, our study illustrates how users and technologies mutually condition each other and are intertwined in ways that call for psychological analysis drawing on concepts from other scholarly disciplines and research fields, such as philosophy (e.g., Barad, 2007; Verbeek, 2005) and media studies (e.g., Boyd, 2011; Hillis et al., 2015b; Liljeström & Paasonen, 2010). There is a need for further development of psychological concepts that can adequately grasp more aspects and nuances of the complex gendered, social and sexual processes of young people's lives in and through digital spaces in order to improve the theoretical understanding of youth sexting. While empirically oriented research on youth sexting practices, their meanings and the ways they matter to young people is essential, future research should also prioritize the development of theoretical understandings of these digital media practices in order to advance the research field.

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