

Homosocial positionings and ambivalent participation

A qualitative analysis of young adults' non-consensual sharing and viewing of privately produced sexual images

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Abstract

Although quantitative studies have found gender differences in the non-consensual sharing of privately produced sexual images, few studies have explored how these sharing practices are shaped by the gendered social interactions in which they take place. Drawing on qualitative data from seven same-sex focus group interviews, this study examines the non-consensual sharing and viewing of sexual images among young adults. The investigation shows how the non-consensual sharing and viewing of sexting images is shaped by homosocial interactions and functions in gendered patterns of positioning, characterized by status enhancement among boys and visual gossiping among girls. However, the study also finds that young adults' participation in these sharing practices is ambivalent, as they experience being both drawn to sexual images due to their private and authentic character, and repelled by them owing to the wrongfulness and illegality of sharing them. These findings are discussed in relation to research on youth sexting.

Keywords

sexting; young adults; image-based sexual abuse; non-consensual; homosociality

Introduction

The word “sexting” denotes a range of practices that involve the production and sharing of sexually explicit images or videos through digital technologies (Hasinoff, 2015). An important aspect of these practices is whether the images¹ (“sexts”) have been produced and shared with or without the consent of the person(s) depicted in them (Albury & Crawford, 2012). A meta-analysis of 39 studies on youth sexting showed that 12 percent (age range 11.9–17.0 years) have forwarded a sext without consent (Madigan et al., 2018), thus indicating that a considerable minority of youth have engaged in this practice. In popular media and in academic research, the non-consensual sharing of sexual images has been described as non-consensual pornography (Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2019) and revenge pornography (Hall & Hearn, 2019). The former refers to the non-consensual dissemination of private sexual images, irrespective of what motivates this dissemination, while the latter refers to instances where the dissemination is conducted with the intention of getting revenge on a person. As noted by Powell, Henry, and Flynn (2018, p. 305), “revenge pornography” is a media-generated term and a misnomer, because not all perpetrators of non-consensual sharing are motivated by revenge and not all content constitutes or serves the purpose of pornography. McGlynn and Rackley (2017) have pointed out how the use of the word “pornography” instils a sense of choice and legitimacy, which is inappropriate when discussing images created and/or distributed without consent. Moreover, these authors have shown how the concepts “revenge pornography” and “non-consensual pornography” fail to focus on the harm caused by these practices and instead introduce the more appropriate term “image-based sexual abuse”, which they define as the “nonconsensual creation and/or distribution of private sexual images” (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017, p. 536). Although the non-consensual creation and sharing of private sexual images has consequently been investigated under varying conceptualisations, several studies have demonstrated that these actions can have devastating consequences for the persons who are victimized (Bates, 2017; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2019; Short, Brown, Pitchford, & Barnes, 2017). Investigating these problematic sharing practices is therefore an important research endeavour if one is to understand and prevent digitally mediated forms of sexual victimisation.

Gendered aspects of the non-consensual sharing of sexual images

Studies on the non-consensual sharing of private sexual images have investigated the extent to which these behaviours and their consequences are gendered. A report on young Danish adults aged 16–20 found that 12 percent of boys but only 2 percent of girls have forwarded a sexual image; moreover, 31 percent of boys and 14 percent of girls have received an image without the consent of the person depicted in the picture (Dahl, Henze-Pedersen, Østergaard, & Østergaard, 2018). Furthermore, Henry, Flynn, and Powell (2019) found that men are significantly more likely to have perpetrated any form of image-based sexual abuse compared to women, while Clancy, Klettke, and Hallford (2019)

found that males are more likely to endorse improved social status as a reason for non-consensually sharing sexual images (40.7 percent) than are females (5 percent). Ruvalcaba and Eaton (2019) found that women are significantly more likely to be victims of the non-consensual sharing of private sexual images than men, who in turn are significantly more likely to be perpetrators of this behaviour. Female victims also reported significantly lower mental well-being and higher levels of somatic symptoms compared to non-victims, while no significant differences were found between male victims and non-victims. Ruvalcaba and Eaton (2019) interpret this difference as being related to the sexual double standard (Bordini & Sperb, 2013), according to which females are punished and stigmatized for expressing their sexuality, while males are not punished, but instead rewarded for actively displaying their sexuality. Sexual double standards have been described in several studies on youth sexting (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013) and have been linked to the phenomenon of “slut-shaming”, commonly defined as “the act of attacking a female for perceived or real sexual activity by calling her a slut or similar names” (Van Royen, Poels, Vandebosch, & Walrave, 2018, p. 82). Furthermore, several scholars have documented the phenomenon of victim blaming, in which females are blamed when private sexual images of them are shared without their consent, while little or no attention is given to the perpetrators of this crime (Hasinoff, 2015; Herriot & Hiseler, 2015). In sum, many studies indicate that several aspects of the non-consensual sharing of sexual images are gendered, including the reasons for engaging in this practice and the consequences it can have for victims.

While quantitative studies have investigated the extent to which gender differences exist in the non-consensual sharing of sexual images, qualitative studies have explored how these sharing practices are shaped by the gendered social interactions in which they take place. Studies have shown how boys accumulate ratings by exchanging sexting images of girls, which function as a form of “currency” (Ringrose et al., 2013, p. 313), as boys can use these images to prove their sexual experiences to other boys and thus gain recognition (Harvey & Ringrose, 2015). One study found that young Danish adults’ non-consensual sharing of “nudes” (i.e. private images of naked bodies) functions as a form of “visual gossiping” (Johansen, Pedersen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2019, p. 1031), in which the perpetrators maintain social bonds through evaluative discussions of the persons depicted in these pictures. However, several scholars have identified the need for studies focusing on the gendered dimensions and social contexts of non-consensual image sharing. According to Clancy et al. (2019, p. 271), future research should seek to understand “the specific motivations of dissemination” and “the context and targets of dissemination”. In their systematic review of research on the non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit media, Walker and Sleath (2017, p. 22) conclude that the gendered nature of this practice must be examined more fully. Moreover, Henry et al. (2019, p. 15) propose that future qualitative research focus on the role of peer support and bystanders in relation to the non-consensual sharing of sexual images. Given that studies have found that this

practice is more common among young adults than in other age groups (Morelli et al., 2016; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2019), it is particularly relevant to investigate these practices among young adults.

The present study

The purpose of this study is to investigate young adults' everyday experiences of non-consensually sharing and viewing privately produced sexual images, with a particular focus on the gendered aspects and social contexts of these sharing practices. The core research question of the study is: How are young adults' experiences of non-consensually sharing and viewing sexual images shaped by the gendered social interactions in which such sharing takes place? The study draws on the concepts of homosociality and positioning in order to explore this question.

The concept of homosociality describes and defines social bonds between persons of the same sex (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 1). Within studies on men and masculinities, the concept has been understood as a mechanism and a social dynamic that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Bird, 1996), with Kimmel (2005, p. 33) conceptualising masculinity as a "homosocial enactment". The concept has generally been used to describe how non-sexual interactions between men serve to maintain forms of male privilege in a gender hierarchy, in which both women and non-hegemonic masculinities are suppressed. Empirical studies using the concept have shown how male homosocial interactions characterized by competitiveness, the sexual objectification of women and boastful narrations of sexual achievements play a central role in defining heterosexual masculinity (Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008). Thus, homosociality refers to same-sex interaction, which is characterized by certain social dynamics. Hammarén and Johansson (2014) argue that the predominant use of the concept of homosociality has relied on monolithic understandings of hegemonic masculinity and has tended to reduce homosociality to a heteronormative, androcentric and hierarchical term. In response, the authors propose a more dynamic understanding of homosociality that encompasses the "contradictory and ambivalent aspects of the concept" (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014, p. 2) and reflects the complex ways in which same-sex individuals interact and bond. They introduce a distinction between "vertical homosociality", which is centred on the strengthening of power and the creation of close homosocial bonds that maintain hegemony, and "horizontal homosociality", which is characterized by emotional closeness and intimacy. The present study draws on this reinterpretation of homosociality in order to analyze the non-consensual sharing and viewing of sexual images among same-sex peers as forms of homosocial interaction.

This investigation employs the concept of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990), in order to understand how the gendered subjects involved in these homosocial interactions position themselves and others through showing and talking about sexual images. Following Davies and Harré (1990, p. 48), positioning is understood here as "the discursive process

whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines". By participating in discursive practices and using the language of these practices (e.g. categories, metaphors), speakers acquire positions and assign positions to others within a normative framework (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). In the present study, the concept of positioning is used in combination with the concept of homosociality to analyze how participants position themselves and others in discursive practices revolving around the sharing and viewing of sexual images. It should be noted that the concept of positioning is employed with the specific analytical aim of exploring homosocial interactions and that this study does not apply the complete range of concepts and analytical procedures from positioning theory as it is exemplified in Harré et al. (2009). Furthermore, as argued by Aagaard and Matthiesen (2016, p. 35), positioning theory focuses exclusively on meaning while neglecting the material aspects of social practices, conceiving physical artefacts as nothing more than "projection screens" for socially constructed meanings. Considering this criticism, the present study analyzes the sharing and viewing of sexual images as social processes, which are discursive and at the same time shaped by the use of particular digital technologies.

Methods

Participants and data collection

The study draws on data from focus group interviews with Danish students from two upper secondary schools conducted in the spring of 2018. The participants were recruited with the help of teachers from the schools. Twenty-nine young adults (20 females, 9 males), aged 17–20, volunteered to participate and filled out consent forms describing the purpose of the study and the use of empirical data. Participants under the legal age were asked to obtain written parental consent. As an acknowledgement of their contribution, participants were given a 100 DKK (approx. 15 USD) gift card to a popular Danish chain store. Twenty-three participants had a Danish majority ethnic background and six had a minority ethnic background (four Middle Eastern, one African and one Asian); all identified as heterosexual. Given that sexting is a sensitive topic and involves gendered experiences (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013), it was expected to be easier for participants to discuss it in small groups comprising people of the same sex with whom they were friends (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). Thus, the participants were divided into seven same-sex focus groups with peers with whom they were friends or at least well acquainted. All interviews were conducted at the two schools, moderated by the author and had an average duration of 80 minutes.

Procedure

The interviews used the vignette method (Kandemir & Budd, 2018), in which participants are given a short case story (a "vignette") that they are asked to consider and discuss.

Instead of starting the interviews by directly asking participants about their own behaviour, vignettes can function as an “icebreaker” when exploring sensitive topics (Bloor et al., 2001). In addition, the vignettes served as prompts (Kandemir & Budd, 2018) or cues for participants to talk about their own experiences and helped structure the sessions so that they remained focused on the topic while fostering discussion regarding a variety of sexting experiences. The vignettes were based on posts from two Danish online counselling hotlines called “Børnetelefonen”² and “Sexlinien”,^{3 4} where children and young adults can anonymously post questions related to issues such as sexuality, parents and relationships. Searches on everyday words used to describe sexting (e.g. “nude pictures”, “nudes”) were conducted, resulting in a total of 180 posts. Six of these posts were selected on the basis that they described different sexting situations. One vignette, which evoked many of the discussions presented in the current study, involved a girl who had sent sexual images of herself to a boy, who had then non-consensually shared them with his friends, which resulted in the girl being bullied. Two of the six vignettes were edited to shorten the time required to read them and the ages of the persons in four of the vignettes were changed to make them closer to that of the participants, enabling them to relate to them more easily. The vignettes were introduced and handed out to the participants. Having read a vignette, the participants were asked the following questions: “What do you think of this case/situation? Does it remind you of anything you or your friends have experienced?”. Following this discussion, the next vignette was presented. All interviews were digitally recorded, before being transcribed using NVivo. The transcriptions were also checked against the audio recording to ensure accuracy. In this process, participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed from the data.

Data analysis

Following an initial reading of the transcribed material, the first part of the analysis consisted of identifying participants’ accounts and discussions of the non-consensual sharing and viewing of sexual images. In all of the focus groups, there were several participants who reported having viewed sexual pictures or videos shared without the consent of the person(s) depicted. In order to analyze the gendered social dynamics that characterized the non-consensual sharing and viewing of these images, the analysis used the concepts of homosociality and positioning. These terms were combined to construct the first theme ‘homosocial positionings’. Whereas this theme centred on the social dynamics of non-consensual sharing practices, the subsequent part of the analysis focused on participants’ individual experiences of participating in these practices. Participants often reported being both attracted to and repulsed by viewing sexual pictures shared without consent, hence their engagement in these practices could be described as ambivalent. These experiences were grouped under the second theme, “ambivalent participation”, which was named with a more descriptive label compared to the first theoretically defined theme.

Results

Homosocial positionings

With the exception of one case, which is described in the section presenting the second theme (ambivalent participation), all of the instances in which the focus group participants had viewed sexual images without consent took place in the company of same-sex peers. The homosocial character of these relationships thus offered an entry point for analyzing the gendered aspects of these sharing practices. Given that the viewing of sexting pictures was characterized by different male and female homosocial positionings, the theme was divided into two subthemes, which are presented in the following sections.

Status enhancement and homosocial bonding

As noted by Van Ouytsel et al. (2017, p. 463), sexual images shared without consent do not necessarily have to be sent, as they can also be shown on a smartphone to others as proof of one's sexual experiences. In the following excerpt, Ali (focus group 5) describes how one of his friends had taken a picture of a girl performing fellatio on him and showed it to his friends without her consent:

The first time I was like, introduced to nude pictures, was at the youth centre, where one of my friends had got his first blowjob and was the first of the boys to get it, and it was so awesome and he had taken a picture of it while she did it. I can clearly remember when the youth workers heard about it and [...] they told him 'What you've done here is not okay and you shouldn't show it to other people', and we boys were like, there was this sort of like, 'brother' or 'guy' thing where we all just supported him and said 'That's just fine!'

Ali (focus group 5)

As Ali's account shows, the sharing and viewing of the sexual picture took place within an already existing social group of male friends. It is clear that the boy who had photographed the girl performing fellatio on him distinguished himself by being "the first" in the friend group to have this type of sexual experience. Through showing and talking about the picture, the boy thereby positioned himself as sexually experienced, while the other boys were positioned as the audience of his sexual storytelling. By showing the digital picture, he presented an unambiguous piece of evidence of his sexual endeavour and was rewarded with high status within the group, which can be seen as an example of the vertical homosociality described by Hammarén and Johansson (2014). Although the boy could perhaps have obtained these social rewards by giving a solely oral account of his experience, the veracity of such an account may have been questioned by the other boys, considering their young age (14–15 years) and limited number of sexual experiences. Similarly to what Harvey and Ringrose (2015, p. 361) describe in their study, the photographic documentation afforded by the camera phone thus functions as "proof" of a sexual experience. Furthermore, when the youth workers discovered that the boy was showing the picture and told him to stop, the other boys lent him support, endors-

ing his actions. In response to the youth workers' reprimand, the boys mobilized what Ali describes as the "brother-" or "guy thing", i.e. a form of male homosocial bonding. When I asked Ali what he thought his friend gained from showing the picture, he gave the following explanation:

Ali: Well, he was obviously the cool guy [...] because he had that like, adrenaline because he was already the cool one because he had got a blowjob and he was the first who had got a blowjob, he was really cool, and then when you have everybody listening to you, you have to keep going because you want them to think that you're interesting and then you start bragging about new stuff and I just think he was like, 'in the moment' and he showed the picture because like, 'Wow', like, it was so cool that we could see it.

Interviewer: Yes?

Ali: So like, yeah... that was definitely what he wanted, like, he wanted to be cool in his friend group.

(Focus group 5)

In his description of what motivated the boy to share the private sexual image, Ali underlines the status-enhancing function of the boy's behaviour. Ali also describes here the social dynamics of the situation, noting how the interaction between the boy – showing the picture, talking about his experience, being at the centre of attention – and the other boys' positive reactions became a self-perpetuating process of homosocial bonding. Although the boy did in fact compromise his own sexual privacy (and, more importantly, that of the girl) by showing the picture, he was socially rewarded for doing so. The boy was in a sense "trading" sexual privacy for masculine status within the peer group. As this case exemplifies, the male participants' experiences of viewing sexual images were situated within homosocial constellations, where the showing of these images was a way of proving one's sexual experiences and positioning oneself higher in a masculine hierarchy.

Visual gossiping and positioning-through-devaluation

The viewing of non-consensually shared sexual images discussed in the female focus groups was also situated in homosocial constellations. However, whereas the act of showing these pictures within male peer groups could serve to improve one's status within a masculine hierarchy and was often socially rewarded, such social transactions were not deemed possible within female peer groups. This difference was particularly evident when participants in focus group 7 discussed the receipt of unsolicited "dick pics" (i.e. digital pictures of penises) from boys:

Michelle: It wouldn't be like 'Hey girls, look what I've just received! How awesome!'

Alice: No.

Rebecca: No no no.

Maya: No.

Michelle: It would be like 'No! I don't know what to do, this is so embarrassing!'

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Rebecca: 'I've received a dick pic: what the fuck do I do?'

Michelle: 'Aargh! What do I do?'

(Focus group 7)

As Michelle remarked, sharing a dick pic with female peers is not characterized by positive distinction or socially rewarding responses. Instead, the participants agreed that the typical responses to receiving such pictures would be embarrassment and bewilderment. This is probably also related to the fact that many girls and women do not like to receive unsolicited dick pics (Burkett, 2015; Mandau, 2020; Salter, 2016). In contrast to Ali's account described above, the sexual attention associated with receiving sexual images of male genitalia was not socially valued and the showing of such pictures could therefore not be traded for improved feminine status.

The following discussions illustrate how the showing and viewing of sexual images within female peer groups was instead associated with other forms of positioning and evaluation. These discussions often revolved around situations in which participants had looked at and talked about pictures of girls whom they knew personally. When I asked the participants in focus group 6 why they were interested in these pictures, they gave the following explanations:

Zainab: I think that it's maybe like, a type of gossip.

Nadia: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes?

Camilla: Yes.

Zainab: Yeah, just like 'Oh, look at this girl, she sent this nude and now it's just all over the place!', and like, I think it's more like that, like, it's not because you're interested in looking at her, like at the other girl's body, right?

Interviewer: No?

Zainab: It's more like, in order to talk in condescending ways about her.

[...]

Nadia: Yeah, like 'Oh, I would never do something like that myself'.

(Focus group 6)

Female participants thus considered the viewing of sexting pictures shared without consent to be a form of gossiping, which revolved around the girls in the pictures. Similarly, Sally (focus group 3) described sexting pictures as being "just a further development of the gossip of our day and age". These descriptions are in line with the aforementioned conceptualisation of non-consensual nude sharing as "visual gossiping" (Johansen et al., 2019, p. 1031), whereby young people maintain social bonds through evaluative discussions of the persons depicted in these pictures.

According to Zainab and the other participants in focus group 6, female interest in sexual images was not directly related to their specific content, but centred on the fact that a girl had taken these pictures and had lost control over them. This justified talking condescendingly about the girl and devaluing her, in order to distance oneself from her

and implicitly position oneself in a category of femininity considered to be more respectable. Similarly, the participants in focus group 7 distanced themselves from girls who had had their sexual images shared without their consent by explaining that their sexting behaviour was related to their lower socioeconomic background:

Alice: And then you think 'Alright, we cannot put ourselves in the same box as her, and therefore we are allowed to call her a whore and a bitch out on the street, because she's not like the rest of us'.

Michelle: She's, she's below us, or...

Alice: Yes.

Michelle: ...we are allowed to gloat because... she comes from this background.

Alice: Because you feel superior to her in some way.

Interviewer: And how are you like, superior to her?

Michelle: Like, both socially and financially and... all those things.

Maya: It's also just because if she has like, sent a nude, then it's just associated with, at least when it has been shared there's just this discourse about it being really like, disgusting and repulsive that she has like, done it!

(Focus group 7)

Michelle also described this "kind" of girl as "the type who smokes cigarettes when she's 12 years old and loses her virginity when she's 13". These female participants thus drew on ideas about socioeconomic background and risky behaviour in order to position the girls depicted in these pictures as belonging to a category of indecent femininity ("a whore and a bitch"). Through this form of slut-shaming (Van Royen et al., 2018), the participants implicitly positioned themselves as belonging to a morally superior category of respectable femininity. The viewing of sexual images was thus shaped by homosocial interactions, which could be characterized as a form of positioning-through-devaluation. Furthermore, the participants focused solely on the fact that these girls had engaged in "risky practices" and lost control over their pictures, paying little or no attention to the person(s) who had non-consensually distributed them. As several scholars have noted (Burkett, 2015; Hasinoff, 2015; Karaian, 2014), this focus on girls is typical of sexting discourses that are centred on risk and that blame the victims of non-consensual sharing. However, the female participants were also reflective and critical of the ways in which they evaluated girls who had had their sexting images shared without their consent. They were aware that to engage in these discursive practices of visual gossiping and harsh evaluations was morally indefensible, as they all agreed that it was the person who had non-consensually shared the pictures who was to blame for these instances. Nevertheless, the female participants admitted that they participated in such derogatory discussions on a regular basis.

Ambivalent participation

The young adults in this study described how they participated in the sharing and viewing of sexual images in homosocial constellations. However, they were rarely engaged in

these social interactions in unambiguous ways. Instead, participants often reported being both attracted to and repulsed by sexual images shared without consent, hence their engagement in these sharing practices can be described as “ambivalent participation”. This theme is exemplified by Emma’s (focus group 2) account of viewing an online folder containing a collection of sexual images of girls and women from her city. This folder was well known among the participants of focus group 2 and they noted that some of their male classmates had access to it. Emma described how one of the boys had shown her the folder on a laptop:

I was like ‘No, don’t show me that, I don’t want to see it’, because then I would basically be part of that violation, but it was nevertheless exciting and like ‘OK, well, I did know her and I did know her’, and I was like ‘Don’t show me that, delete it and exit that link’, but he just kept on scrolling through the pictures, and yet I didn’t leave like, I stayed. And I think that’s fucking despicable of me, but like... that also just shows that like, the fact that there is something exciting about it.

(Emma, focus group 2)

This excerpt epitomizes participants’ ambivalent experiences of viewing sexual images shared without consent. According to Emma, her failure to leave the computer made her complicit in the privacy violation implied in viewing the sexual images and she underlined the moral wrongfulness of this by describing it as a “fucking despicable” thing to do. She subsequently noted, “Even though I think I have like, like a very feminist predisposition, I can still be totally like ‘Ooh, that’s exciting!’, I mean, and I think that it’s so frustrating to feel like that”. She was thus critical of her own inability to stop looking at the pictures and felt that it went against her feminist values and identity. By using the notion of a “feminist predisposition”, she highlighted the gendered aspect of these privacy violations, i.e. that the folder contained pictures of girls that had been non-consensually shared by boys. To elucidate the theme of ‘ambivalent participation’, two subthemes that centre on the participants’ experiences of attraction and repulsion are presented in the following sections.

Attraction: privacy and authenticity

When the participants discussed what made it alluring to look at sexual images that had been shared without consent, they often referred to the private character of these images. Indeed, they framed these images as “forbidden” due to the fact that they had been shared without consent. As the following excerpt shows, this was perceived to be a key part of what made them interesting to look at:

It’s extremely difficult if there’s somebody who has a nude of someone from school and they ask me if I want to see it. I basically know that I shouldn’t see it and like, I don’t necessarily want to or... I’m 100 percent sure that I would never think of sharing it online, but

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I still want to see it! [...] I just can't help it. I'm so fascinated by all the things that I'm not allowed to know about.

(Sally, focus group 3)

Sally's troubled account illustrates an ambivalent experience similar to Emma's and she later described how she was drawn by the information she "wasn't entitled to". Similarly, Albert (focus group 4) noted that "you are also driven by the fact that you know it's somewhat forbidden". These descriptions suggest that it was the fact that the images had been shared *without* consent that made them interesting and that the viewing of them was driven by curiosity, fascination and a desire to unveil the private sexual life of another person. Although Sally claimed that she would not engage in the active sharing (e.g. forwarding) of sexual images, her account indicates an interest in sexting pictures, which arguably plays an important role in the facilitation and continuation of this practice by creating a market-like "demand" for illegitimate pictures, potentially enticing the possessors of these pictures to share them.

When the participants described what made it interesting to look at sexual images that had been shared without consent, they also referred to the fact that they knew the person in the image and connected this to a notion of "authenticity":

Alice: Well, it's a lot more transgressive if it's someone you know a little bit.

Interviewer: Yes?

Alice: Or like, someone you've heard about.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Alice: Or like, it's like, it's like more authentic in a way.

Michelle: Yes.

Rebecca: If you're just told that like, there's someone you know, like through others, like 'Holy shit: this is happening out in the real world!'

(Focus group 7)

Like the discussions above, these descriptions suggest that viewing sexual images was conceived as a way of disclosing the private and authentic sexual life of a specific, locally known person. The way in which participants discussed the pictures (e.g. "someone you've heard about") again illustrates how viewing and talking about them becomes a form of visual gossiping (Johansen et al., 2019). Furthermore, discussions of "authenticity" and "the real world" suggest that the participants were drawn to these private sexual images as true-to-life representations of ordinary or mundane sexual activities. In a similar vein, the participants in focus group 2 talked about the authenticity and "realness" of self-produced sexual images by contrasting them with the artificiality of pornography:

In the porn industry [...] what you see is very much like the ideal female body [...] and that's like totally distorted and completely unrealistic, so maybe also like, to look at the authentic.

(Sandra, focus group 2)

Thus, the authenticity of private sexual images was related to the fact that they did not depict ideal bodies, but instead constituted realistic depictions of sexualized bodies and activities that were quotidian and less staged. Similar to what Van Doorn (2010, p. 422) describes in his analysis of user-generated amateur online pornography, the participants contrasted the “fake fantasy space” of “glossy” pornography with “realistic” depictions of sexuality, imbued with an “aura of authenticity”. This interest in sexting pictures could consequently be seen as a “fetishisation of the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ sexual experiences” (Van Doorn, 2010, p. 412). In contrast to the discussions in focus group 6, where interest in sexual images was not directly related to their specific content, the above excerpts illustrate how the content of these pictures rendered them alluring.

Repulsion: moral reservations and refusals of homosocial bonding

While the above accounts indicate what made sexual images interesting and alluring for participants to look at, the present subtheme centres on what made the viewing of these pictures repelling. In focus group 4, male participants discussed their experiences with viewing private sexual images of girls that they had received in instant messaging chat groups. One participant, Simon, described how some of his soccer friends shared images of locally known girls, in which the girls were naked, their faces were visible and their names were displayed. Simon noted how he had never forwarded the images, because he did not want his name to be associated with this kind of non-consensual image exchange. His unwillingness to participate in the active sharing thus seemed to stem from his fear of the possible legal consequences of doing so. However, as the following excerpt shows, his unwillingness was also related to an awareness of the unethical aspects of non-consensually sharing sexual images:

I also thought that like ‘Fuck’, I mean, because... I basically knew that this was wrong, like, and that they [his friends] had got the pictures from girls who trusted them, but I also just knew that those boys they, I mean, they were capable of doing anything.
(Simon, focus group 4)

Although Simon’s fear of legal repercussions could be characterized as egoistic, his concern about the girls who had at one time sent these images suggests an empathetic attitude towards them. He noted how his friends encouraged each other to engage in hook-ups with the girls depicted in the pictures by writing comments in the chat groups like “These girls are just sluts and they are willing to do anything” and “Just try going for them, guys!”. He pointed out how his friends “thought it was really cool and that [...] the attitude in the group was that a girl was just someone you had sex with and that was it”. Thus, the norms and viewpoints expressed in this male soccer friend group were explicitly misogynistic, objectifying and approving the non-consensual sharing of sexual images. These viewpoints are in many ways similar to what has been described in other studies on male homosociality (Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008) and ‘laddish’ masculinities (Phipps & Young,

2015). As this excerpt shows, Simon to some extent distanced himself from the norms and attitudes of the peer group and was reluctant to engage in the sharing. While his account illustrates some of the homosocial dynamics that are at play in the non-consensual sharing of sexual images, it also indicates how personal reflections and empathetic responses might inhibit active participation in these practices. However, Simon's reluctance did not entail an actual objection to these practices when they took place and he was therefore still a passive bystander in a problematic and illegal practice.

Unwillingness to engage in the non-consensual sharing of sexual images was also discussed among the male participants in focus group 5. One participant, Steven, described his experience of being shown a sexual image of a girl on the smartphone of one of his male friends:

Steven: I mean, it hasn't been a long time since I've seen a nude picture.

Interviewer: No?

William [directed at Steven]: No, it hasn't.

Steven: Like, it was just a buddy, a good guy, a very nice guy, and he's had a good relationship with a girl and then he like, has these pictures so it's just like, 'Hey, take a look at this!' and I was like 'Woow! She was hot!'

Interviewer: Yes?

Steven: So like, eehm, and that was that, but I mean like, I mean I could just imagine how intimidating it would have been for her if she had experienced that I had seen her naked, I mean like, that would have been so terrible, like, to know that 'that guy over there, he has seen me naked'.

(Focus group 5)

While Steven initially acceded to his friend's boastful act of showing the image by responding with excitement, he subsequently imagined how the girl would feel if she knew that he had seen her naked, underlining how "terrible" and "intimidating" this would be for her. The contrast between his initial reaction and his subsequent empathetic attitude thus illustrates his ambivalent experience of viewing the image. The notion of being "intimidating" suggests that, by being shown the picture, Steven experienced being positioned as a third party who capitalized on the intimate and trustful relationship in which the girl had initially sent the picture. In response to Steven's account, Christian and William noted how this was an uncomfortable position to be in:

Christian: It's also a pretty awkward situation to be in if somebody is showing you a nude and you're like, 'You shouldn't be showing that to me?'

William: Like, [imitating the voice of the person showing the picture] 'Are we gonna be bro's?'

(Focus group 5)

Here, William's ironic imitation of the person showing the picture can be seen as a way of exposing and criticising the homosocial bonding that such acts of image disclosure

intend to evoke. It can thus be understood as a way of refusing the subject position of being a “bro” or male confederate, which he is offered in the showing and sharing of the image. Likewise, Steven noted that sharing the image by showing it on a smartphone was “actually just as bad” as sending it, even though it “seemed a bit more legal”. Thus, the collective normative understanding in this focus group was that sharing sexual images without consent was wrong. This stands directly in contrast to the homosocial interactions described by Ali, in which the showing of sexual images was a way of proving one’s sexual experiences and positioning oneself higher in a masculine hierarchy. The normative understanding in focus group 5 also differs from the misogynistic viewpoints expressed in Simon’s group of soccer friends, where the sharing of sexual images was approved. These different understandings can be related to the fact that Ali and Simon both described instances of image sharing that occurred in relatively large groups when the two informants were younger, whereas Steven and the other participants discussed recent situations only involving two male friends. Although the qualitative nature of the data precludes empirical generalisations about these relations, the cases analyzed here seem to suggest that both the age of the persons involved in the image sharing and the social constellation (i.e. group vs. dyadic) in which it took place might have influenced the degree to which they reflected upon and denounced these practices.

Discussion

This study has explored young adults’ everyday experiences of viewing and sharing sexual images without consent, focusing on how these experiences are shaped by gendered social interactions. Drawing on the concepts of homosociality and positioning, the study has analyzed the sharing and viewing of sexual images in homosocial interactions, demonstrating how it functions in gendered patterns of positioning. Among boys, sharing sexual images can be a way of proving one’s sexual experiences and positioning oneself higher in a masculine hierarchy. This is in line with the study by Yeung et al. (2014, p. 335), which found that sexual images sent by girls were perceived as “trophies” among boys and could be shared in order to demonstrate their sexual success. The findings of the present study are also congruent with studies by Ringrose and colleagues (Harvey & Ringrose, 2015; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013), which show that the non-consensual sharing of sexting images may constitute a way of “proving” heterosexual desirability to gain recognition and respect among one’s male peers. These gendered social dynamics are in many ways similar to the homosocial interactions described by Flood (2008, p. 346), where males compete over sexual experiences, receiving “kudos and accolades” from one another in response to their boastful sexual storytelling. In Flood’s (2008) study, one participant describes a “stereotypical masculine fantasy” in which his girlfriend performs fellatio on him:

And I'm sittin' there with my beer. And I'm watchin' the footy. And I've got a girl suckin' me off [little laugh]. And I just go, 'Hohhh. If the boys could see me now' (Flood, 2008, p. 348).

The last sentence is informative, as this interviewee's reference to an imagined male audience illustrates a homosocial desire to be gazed at by other males and to be recognized as (hetero)sexually active. If we compare Flood's example with Ali's account of the boy showing the digital fellatio picture, it becomes clear how the smartphone – with its ability to take and display pictures anywhere (Palmer, 2012) – can be used to fulfil this desire. In this case, the male audience is not just imagined, but physically present, witnessing and celebrating the boy's sexual endeavour. Employed in this way, the smartphone becomes a device that bridges the gap between "private" sexuality and "public" homosocial interactions by documenting and visualising the former in the context of the latter. The present study thus shows how the non-consensual sharing of sexual images is both shaped by homosocial interactions and the use of particular digital technologies.

This study has also shown that while the sharing of sexual images proved to be a way of proving one's sexual experiences in order to position oneself higher in a masculine hierarchy, it was associated with different forms of homosocial interaction in the female groups. Here, digital evidence of sexual attention (i.e. "dick pics") could not be traded for status within the homosocial order. Instead, the viewing of sexual images shared without consent functioned as a form of "visual gossiping" (Johansen et al., 2019, p. 1031), in which female participants positioned the girls depicted in these pictures as belonging to a "lower" category of femininity while positioning themselves as belonging to a morally superior, gendered category. This positioning-through-devaluation can be seen as reflecting the vertical homosociality described by Hammarén and Johansson (2014, p. 5), in line with their point that vertical homosociality is not restricted to male same-sex interaction. The discussions in the female groups can also be understood as examples of "boundary-work", in which people explicate and emphasize similarities and distinctions between themselves and others, as described in the study on young Norwegians' sexual morality by Fjær, Pedersen, and Sandberg (2015, p. 962). Furthermore, the female participants in the present study focused solely on the girls who had lost control over their pictures by engaging in "risky practices", paying little or no attention to the moral responsibility of the person(s) who had distributed the pictures. As several scholars have remarked (Hasinoff, 2015; Karaian, 2014; Powell & Henry, 2014) an emphasis on girls who have "lost control" over their sexting pictures is characteristic of sexting discourses that centre on risk and victim blaming. Taken together, the male and female homosocial interactions described in the present study can both be seen as reflecting the sexual double standard (Bordini & Sperb, 2013), as they revolved around rewarding male displays of sexual activity while punishing (e.g. slut-shaming) female displays of sexual activity. In line with previous studies, this investigation has shown how sexual double standards are reproduced in relation to sexting (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019) and that even in cultural settings that are charac-

terized by liberal, progressive and permissive sexual normativities, sexual double standards continue to exist (Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017; Fjær et al., 2015).

The present study's findings may also elucidate some of the motivational aspects of non-consensual image sharing. In contrast to revenge porn, which is characterized by an unambiguous motive of getting revenge on a former partner (Hall & Hearn, 2019; Langlois & Slane, 2017), this investigation has illustrated how young adults engage in non-consensual sharing practices out of curiosity and fascination, even while regarding such engagement as morally wrong. The participants' framing of sexting images as authentic representations of sexuality is relevant for understanding young people's interest in these pictures. In her analysis of the growing interest in amateur and home-made porn since the 1990s, Barcan (2002, p. 104) argues that "the private" becomes even more strongly fetishized, as it disappears in a world in which we are all encouraged to perform our subjectivity in public. As Barcan notes, we long for a glimpse of the private, despite the fact that we change or destroy the realm of privacy the more we consume it. If we apply this analysis to the present study, we can understand young people's interest in non-consensually shared sexual images as stemming from a desire to access the private sphere of other people and to gain an insight into their "authentic" sex lives. However, this study has also found that several participants refrained from participating in non-consensual sharing practices, thus manifesting signs of resistance to objectifying and sexist forms of homosocial bonding. In sum, these findings are relevant for understanding what leads young adults to either engage in or refrain from the non-consensual sharing of sexual images.

While previous studies have examined personal factors related to the non-consensual sharing of sexual images, such as subjective norms and personal attitudes (Clancy et al., 2019) or benevolent and hostile sexism (Morelli et al., 2016), the present study has illustrated how gendered social dynamics shape this practice. A thorough understanding of this problematic and illegal practice must therefore consider the social aspects of how these images are shared. This is also important if one is to understand how the non-consensual sharing of sexual images situated in "local" contexts of peers differs from more organized forms of non-consensual sharing that take place in online networks (e.g. Henry & Flynn, 2019), where social relations are often anonymous, temporary and fluid (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016, p. 2). Further research into how these practices of the non-consensual sharing of sexual images play out in the everyday lives of young adults is important for developing effective educational interventions aimed at preventing these problematic and illegal digital media practices.

Limitations

The focus group discussions of the non-consensual sharing of sexual images presented in this study concerned practices that are illegal in Denmark. Therefore, it cannot be ruled out that the renunciation of these practices expressed by the young adults in this study

was to some extent influenced by a social desirability bias evoked by me as an adult interviewer and the social setting of the focus group interview. Furthermore, given that all of the participants identified as heterosexual, this study does not take into account how the experiences and interactions described might differ for persons of other sexual orientations.

Concluding remarks

The present study has explored a digital media practice that can have serious mental and social consequences for its victims (Bates, 2017; Ruvalcaba & Eaton, 2019). However, these practices differ markedly from forms of consensual sexting, which are often characterized by mutual forms of self-disclosure and the maintenance of sexual intimacy with physically distant others (e.g. García-Gómez, 2017). It is therefore important to bear in mind that this investigation has focused exclusively on problematic practices of digitally mediated sexual communication, in contrast to the many positive and fulfilling ways in which digital media can be used in intimate relations.

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Notes

- 1 In this article, "sexual images" refers to private pictures and videos with a sexual content that are produced and/or shared using digital technologies (e.g. smartphones).
- 2 <https://bornetelefonen.dk/>
- 3 <https://www.sexlinien.dk/>
- 4 Literally translated: "The Children's Telephone" and "The Sex Line".

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