

## Traveling imagery Young people's sexualized digital practices

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### **Abstract**

*How is the sexualized digital imagery that young people engage in enacted and spread? How are negotiations of normativity reshaped by analogue-digital involvement? This study travels through shady as well as easily accessible parts of the web, combining insights with analogue research approaches in trying to contemplate these questions in new ways. We use digital ethnography, analogue fieldwork, interviews, and helpline cases to study how young people's sexualized imagery moves through and transforms across boundless networks, and also across digital and analogue space. Thinking with new materialist analytics, we show how these movements blur the distinction between mundane and abusive practices, and how the opaque and indeterminate character of the material functions as a game changer and affects what it means to be young in gendered communities. Although the effects vary among different young people and among different social groups, in all cases they infiltrate conditions for becoming, positioning, and relating.*

## Introduction

Young people's engagement in digital and social media has increasingly emphasized the technology's visual aspects and it has created a constant flow of online imagery. This development taps into the processes involved in the formation of relationships and social identities in various ways. In this article, we explore young people's engagement in the production and spread<sup>1</sup> of *sexualized* digital imagery. We study the processes through which this material is enacted, how it travels and transforms across websites, and how this effects unpredictable and volatile relations and positionings among young people.

In thinking about these processes, we are inspired by new materialist theorizing (Barad, 2007; Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011; Søndergaard, 2013) that emphasizes the enactment of phenomena as an effect of entangling and intra-active material-discursive forces.<sup>2</sup> We combine this perspective with poststructuralist conceptualizations of normativity, gender, and the formation of the subject as a two-sided process of subjection to, and coming to agency through, the given discursive conditions (Butler, 1993; Søndergaard, 2002, 2019a). This enables us to reflect upon and analyze *how the sexualized digital imagery that young people engage in is enacted, produced, spread and contested, and how these practices enable negotiations of (gendered) positionings and belongings*. Our conceptualization of gender follows Butler's analyses of gender performativity (Butler, 1993, 1999), seeing gender as a doing, a reiterative practice that is negotiated and repeated through processes of subjectification (Søndergaard, 2002). In a new materialist refinement of these perspectives, our conceptualization is emphasized as a process of material-discursive enactment—introducing the concept of *matter as a congealing of practice* to the conceptual approach (Barad, 2007; Butler, 1993; Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011).

We set off by exploring the research literature to examine the ways in which sexualized digital practices have already been investigated, before turning to some of the methodological challenges that have been raised in the field. However, this is not a straightforward field to enter, and we dedicate considerable attention to these methodological reflections and to the description of our research material. In particular, we assume that our approach of digital ethnography may be of interest to other researchers in this area, including the way that it is combined with analogue fieldwork and interviews. Few researchers have investigated young people's production and spreading of sexualized imagery using digital ethnographic approaches, let alone including the sexualized digital imagery as empirical material in their analyses.<sup>3</sup> This may be due to the challenges related to legal aspects and ethical considerations. Considering it necessary to learn about these phenomena as they emerge, move, reiterate, and transform, we nevertheless chose to engage in a development and rethinking of methods and ethics rather than keeping the troubled research material at a distance (Søndergaard, 2019).

Following these reflections, we turn to our analyses and follow the sexualized imagery on its dispersed travels in and out of digital and analogue space and time. We look at young people's practices, understandings, and conditions for negotiating the normativi-

ties, and we also to the gendered positionings that are produced. Our contribution here is dedicated, first, to providing an insight in a field that is difficult to access and which is fairly opaque to most adults. Second, we offer nuanced perspectives for contemplating these highly complex and intricate processes, which (in the research literature and also in public discourse) are often reduced to questions of good and bad behavior, guilt and abuse, and truth and lies.

One of our findings points towards an interesting ambiguity in the sexualized digital practices that we look at. The gendered discourses highlighting the bodies of young women and the potential erotic investment in those bodies as the focal point of those practices seem to remain remarkably stable across the traveling and transformation of the imagery that we find in our analyses.

We use the term *sexualized* throughout this article, indicating that the material that we talk about is being interpreted, invested in, and/or evaluated in terms of its erotic potential. However, we do not use sexualized as a normative or judgmental term, merely as an indicator of the meaning-making and mattering involved in the processing of the imagery. In other words, the same picture may mean very different things in different visual and verbal contexts. For example, the interpretation of images of upper thighs may depend on whether the visual presentation happens on a porn site or in a textbook for medical students. Our focus is on sexually saturated digital material and practices among young people.

## Previous research

In the research literature, the production and spread of sexualized imagery are usually divided into consensual and non-consensual practices. Consensual practices are often associated with the term sexting and describe activities where those involved agree on the conditions for sharing images (Powell & Henry, 2014). Non-consensual practices are sometimes referred to as revenge porn or image-based abuse (Henry, Powell, & Flynn, 2017) and describe imagery being shared without the knowledge or against the wishes of one or more of those depicted.

Research has been interested in the individual backgrounds and motivations for different image-sharing practices, and has explored why girls and young women produce and post 'sexy' selfies on digital media. Among these studies, Daniels and Zurbruggen (2016) emphasize how young women often feel a significant pressure to appear sexual. Meanwhile, Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015) see these practices as ways of opposing the widespread sexualization of female bodies and as a method to regain agency over one's own body. Other researchers have focused on people sharing sexualized images with partners, friends, or acquaintances. Cooper, Quayle, Jonsson, and Svedin (2016) stress that the contexts, meanings and intentions of interrelational sharing practices are remarkably varied. They identify, for example, cases where the sharing of sexualized imagery is part of

flirtatious endeavors to gain romantic attention. They also find examples where sharing is a response to pressure from peers to gain respect, or from a partner to maintain a good relationship. They even find some examples where the sharing of images can be attributed to *an experimental phase* during youth.

Several studies have emphasized how images in some cases evolve from situations in which there was initially agreement as to how they would be shared, but were later non-consensually distributed to an audience that is much wider than agreed upon. This may happen as a result of conflictual relationships (Shaheen, 2014), processes of social bonding among peers (Johansen, Pedersen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2018), or as a means of boosting social identity (Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015). This previous research provides insight into the individual intentions and reasons, and helps us to understand the individual reasoning behind the variations in the sharing of sexualized images. Another part of the research literature approaches image-sharing practices as social activities and as new ways of relating. This work redirects attention from the individual perspectives to social meaning-making processes. For instance, Ringrose et al. (2013) focus on the ways in which value is constituted in relation to certain sexualized images. They ask why particular images are valuable, and how these ideas about image value are affected by normativities regarding gender and sexual morality.

Other parts of the literature are more concerned with the technological conditions and their effects in relation to digital sharing practices. They analyze how the ephemerality of, for instance, Snapchat communication creates and invites a certain intimacy and trust (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). Our research approach and interest in this field mainly, but not exclusively, shares the ambitions of this relatively limited part of the research literature that focuses on the entanglement of sociocultural dynamics, and the technological conditions and affordances in image-sharing practices. These studies seek to understand the dynamics integral to young people's practices, thus approaching them as complex, entangled and volatile formations. This approach is in alignment with the digital practices and the kind of youth involvement that we encountered when working with the material that forms the basis for our study.

The practices that we encountered during our digital ethnography, analogue fieldwork, interviews, and helpline cases challenged the dualistic distinction between consensual and non-consensual image sharing. They were not easily categorized using ubiquitous terms such as revenge porn or image-based abuse. Instead, the practices in our material demonstrated a wide variety and complexity in young people's sexualized digital engagement, which invited a rethinking of the established categories and ways of understanding the field, including more refined analytical approaches and conceptualizations.

## Methodological approach

Our methodological approach is shaped by an explorative and situated use of multiple approaches and methods across both online and offline spheres (Leander & McKim, 2003; Markham & Baym, 2009; Postill & Pink, 2012). Through multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995) and combining analogue fieldwork, interviews, digital ethnography and helpline cases, our ambition was to capture *the space of the social* across contexts (Marcus, 1999). In this way, we deliberately chose to enter the complex and volatile practices of producing and spreading sexualized digital imagery among young people through different analogue and digital entry points. Thus, our field site takes the form of a network (Burrell, 2009) that is not bound in localities but, following Pink (2015), in a collection of ‘things’ (e.g. images, videos, debates, digital functions, stories, contexts); or, as Markham and Gammelby (2018) would term it, *data points* that intertwine through ongoing and unpredictable movements.

The majority of the research material was produced by Penille Rasmussen, who studied the field through *simultaneous* explorative movements in and out of the research field’s many analogue and digital entry points, while continuously bringing information across the different entry points to explore the field further. We used, for example, hyperlinks that were provided in the helpline cases to move forward during the digital ethnography.

### *Fieldwork and interviews*

The analogue fieldwork was carried out over 21 days at a vocational training school on the outskirts of Copenhagen. During the fieldwork, Penille took part in classroom activities on equal terms with students in a school class assigned by the school counsellor. This class consisted of 16 boys and 2 girls. Penille engaged in conversations with them about their sexualized media practices, worries, desires, friendships, and romantic relationships, and also about the comprehensive media attention that young people’s production and spreading of sexualized imagery had in 2018 when the field work was carried out. The young people generously shared their stories, problems, and dilemmas; they also showed Penille some of the sexualized imagery that they had produced, sent, or received, both with and without consent.

In the final week of the fieldwork, Penille also conducted seven semi-structured interviews with a total of 21 students (18 boys and 3 girls), primarily from the same school class. However, these students also functioned as gatekeepers, providing access to students from other classes at the school. The students were free to choose whether to be interviewed individually or in a group. All except one boy chose to be interviewed in groups of two to five students. The topic is quite vulnerable due to high levels of normativity (Hasinoff, 2015) and to the illegal classifications of some of their practices (e.g. sharing nudes non-consensually). Thus, the students who chose to be interviewed in groups were also asked to choose with whom they wanted to be interviewed to enable

an open and safe environment. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, with the purpose of unfolding the multifaceted and sometimes contrasting complexities and nuances of their production and spreading of sexualized imagery. The conversations were structured around themes such as social and digital media, norms, gender and sexuality, production and spreading of imagery in different environments, and humor and belonging. The young people were encouraged to express their thoughts, both with regard to their own experiences and to the experiences of others that they were familiar with, in addition to the incidents and situations that Penille observed during her fieldwork. Moreover, they discussed some of the practices that Penille had encountered during the digital ethnography and in the helpline cases, while avoiding any form of specific or compromising information. She also talked with them about the many folders of images online, and how they made sense of imagery depicting relatively unrecognizable girls.

### Digital ethnography and helpline cases

During a six-month period before, during and after the analogue fieldwork, Penille daily undertook approximately three hours of digital ethnography on social and digital media. She accessed sites where images are posted and exchanged, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Google Drive, Dropbox, Discord servers, various bulletin, image and discussion boards, and websites created specifically to spread sexualized imagery. Focused on practices of young people aged 15 to 20 years old (although determining such information can be quite difficult in the digital world), Penille explored the various platforms and sites, resulting in approximately 300 screenshots.

We did not know what to expect from the field, and we had no previous research to lean on. Our first aim was therefore simply to familiarize ourselves with the practices, the tacit codes, the language of the field (Hine, 2000, 2009, 2015), and the conditions for accessing more hidden spaces in these digital networks. In other words, the beginning of our ethnography was focused on trying out different methodological grips (Hine, 2011): where and how to access different digital media, which material and users to follow, when to participate and when not etc. As we moved around, we primarily *lurked* (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, & Cui, 2009). We searched Google for some of the cases presented in the media. Through the many different cues that we followed (e.g., images, hyperlinks, users, names, sites etc.), we were able to gain access to some of the Internet's more shadowy sites, albeit sometimes blocked by a paywall. Along the way, we made use of encrypted browsers and constructed profiles to move closer to the field. We were aided by other parts of our research material, such as the helpline cases from *Save the Children Denmark* (which we will present later on), because they would sometimes include links to specific websites and digital media profiles from which images were being posted and spread.

Throughout the digital ethnography, we were curious about the technological architectures of the social and digital media, their designs, and implied affordances, but mostly we kept returning to digital images as they travel across platforms. We looked at comments, likes and other responses accompanying the images across media and sites. We studied both the users and the material that they produced (Lomborg, 2012). Karpf (2012) describes the instability of online material resulting from the ongoing transformation of the Internet. Content, sites and people appear, change and disappear at unknown times, and it remains unclear what we as researchers miss in the process (Lomborg, 2012). Based on approval from the Danish State Attorney, we took notes, screenshots, saved images and stored material on a highly secured server that was provided by our university. This allowed us to analyze this material as part of a network consisting of the compiled research material. The material relevant to this study seemed to be endless and it is indeed impossible to capture everything online, as Markham (2013) states. Thus, we did not stop producing research material because there was no more material to be found but rather we stopped because patterns of practices started to emerge.

We also included cases from a helpline that is operated by *Save the Children Denmark*, targeted at children and young people under the age of 18 with requests regarding social-digital issues. These cases also provided insight into the many ways in which imagery is produced and spread. The cases that we collected date back to the period from May 2016 until July 2018, and were categorized by *Save the Children Denmark* as *digital sexual harassment*, which includes all cases related to sexualized imagery. After excluding cases outside of our targeted age group, cases regarding grooming, and cases unrelated to imagery, we were left with 308 cases, ranging from a one-line question to two full A4 pages describing a situation.

This network of differentiated data points encountered through our various analogue and digital entry points allowed us to study patterns and practices distributed among young users of the digital media. Some images would reappear across the platforms, some users may have done so too, but our methodological approach did not enable us to follow or analyze specific individuals or cases. However, that was never our ambition—our ambition was to study and analyze varying configurations of practices.

### ***Ethics***

Our ethical reflections are aligned with Baym (2013), who argues that when engaging in research involving the Internet, the crucial activities and layers of meaning are to be found in the invisible connections as they occur across platforms in a multiplicity of globally distributed and diffused networks. Along with the many new opportunities that the Internet provides for research (Gosling & Mason, 2015) come new challenges and dilemmas, creating a need for not only new methodological approaches but also reconsideration of ethical guidelines (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Søndergaard, 2019b). Our ethical considerations are partly inspired by the guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers

(AOIR), which emphasize how ethics, particularly in relation to Internet research, are contextual and imply a wide range of situational decisions (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This perspective redirects our attention—from exclusively considering the well-being of the individual, it is also necessary to focus on the multiplicity of enacting forces that interact when (new) phenomena are produced. Søndergaard (2019b) suggests that introducing this more extensive perspective on research ethics may be a potentially reparative consideration directed at the comprehensive entanglement of forces that produce the phenomenon that researchers work with(in).

Our ethical approach combined elements drawn from general ethical research principles (showing consideration for the well-being of the individuals involved) with a far more comprehensive perspective (caring for the apparatus and the multiple individuals, bodies, forces, and intra-acting processes that we study) (Søndergaard, 2019b). Therefore, we continuously weighed consideration of the well-being and protection of the individual against the importance of the research and of producing knowledge aimed at the context and intra-agency of multiple forces that produce the conditions through which these same individuals are formed—sometimes threatened, sometimes thrilled. This balance was particularly relevant because we were dealing with sexualized images of girls, some of whom had not given their consent and/or were unaware that these images of them were floating around online.

### **Potentiality and spacetime mattering**

Involvement in digital spaces implies multiple epistemological uncertainties (Sundén, 2012). Digital phenomena can appear and can be narrated rather differently from the analogue phenomena that they purport to represent. The identity of those posting or being represented in posts and imagery, and also the amount of *likes* that these posts receive and indications of the number of times that an image has been shared or viewed, are all potentially shrouded in uncertainty and open to manipulation. Common identification markers such as age, gender, national belonging, and race may be obliterated—and if not, then the link to analogue identity may remain uncertain. The circumstances surrounding the production and spreading of imagery can be told in a certain way, but might be very different. In other words, digital phenomena are volatile and their relationship to analogue phenomena often remains opaque. This uncertainty is affective. The potential (lack of) correspondence between analogue and digital phenomena is not only uncertain but is also affective in the intra-action among other elements and forces that produce the phenomena that we study.

We do not claim to draw the full potential from Giorgi Agamben's rich conceptual framework. Nevertheless, his ideas regarding potentiality have inspired our reflections on how this uncertainty affects the phenomena and participants that are embedded in technological spaces. Agamben explains potentiality as that which: "is not simply the poten-



tial to do [or be] this or that thing, but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality" (Agamben, 1999, pp. 179-180). He emphasizes how it is "not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather the existence of non-Being" that needs analytical attention. Following Søndergaard (2013), this attention must also be directed towards the agentiality of non-being—whether studying its elaborated, imagined becoming and being or its absence as the presence of potentiality. Following this line of thought, digital phenomena, processes, movements, comments, images, and posts may not *only* enact various effects by their assumed existence in terms of representing some kind of analogue reality but also by their potential as—in that same analogue-related sense—non-existence.

Thinking of potentialities as agential—that is, as material-discursive phenomena enacting other phenomena (Barad, 2007)—enables us to reflect upon the subjective and social effects of imagery, whether in its present digital representation, in its potential reappearance or imagined digital destiny in as yet undiscovered sites, or even in the mistaken and displaced identification of particular bodies and persons that may be drawn from this imagery. To take an example, what at first appears to be Peter<sup>15</sup> sharing images of his ex-girlfriend, Julia<sup>16</sup>, might actually be Sarah<sup>18</sup> and Melanie<sup>17</sup> sharing images of what appears to be Julia<sup>16</sup>, but is in reality an image of a professional model that was found on Google and has been manipulated in Photoshop. This photo may have been posted in a commercial context and removed after a period—only to reappear in a different digital context, posted by someone who saved the image when it was first posted. In other words, people or users may appear to be someone familiar to a particular community of young people, but could potentially be someone else or could even be more than one person. Nevertheless, the indeterminate potentialities affect the ways of thinking and relating among the young people involved.

These kinds of practices, their potentialities and ways of emerging, entail complex and diffuse relations in and between time and space. With her conceptualization of spacetime mattering, Karen Barad argues against traditional understandings of time as a neutral, pre-given process of linear moments and of space as a pre-existing geometrical container (Barad, 2007, p. 179-180). Instead, she suggests a multifaceted understanding of time and space as constitutive and agential phenomena that do not create exterior boundaries for becoming. Time and space are emerging phenomena through which boundaries, relations, and connections are shaped and reshaped in a constant and flexible spacetime mattering.

This conceptualization of spacetime mattering helps us to focus on the subjective and social effects, including their volatility, as part of the digitally designed and conditioned destabilization of time and space. When things are posted, deleted and possibly reposted, and when images and users move in, out and across online and offline spaces, in and between past, present, and future, new dimensions of time and space emerge and enact new subjective and social effects. If a sexualized image of a girl starts to circulate among her friends, then it not only affects her present being, becoming and relating, but it also

affects the recollection of what she did in the past and who it is possible to become in the future, given that the image may keep appearing. Even though the image is deleted, these effects are still enacted. Due to the technological possibilities, the potentiality entwined in *whether, when* and *how* the image may reappear prevails.

In the next section, we use the concepts of potentiality and spacetime mattering to focus on the ways in which sexualized digital imagery is enacted, produced, spread and contested.

## The production and spread of sexualized digital imagery

Young people's sexualized digital practices and spreading of imagery take different forms and move in ever-changing directions. Some production and spreading happens among acquainted young people, while other spreading practices move far beyond the network of friends and acquaintances into more organized and global sharing environments. This distinction was also emphasized by Jørgensen (2018).

We begin by analyzing the ambiguous, unpredictable, and volatile relations and positionings<sup>4</sup> within young people's sexualized digital practices, which are enacted through the imagery's travel, the digital platforms and their affordances, the negotiations and navigations of imagery. We will also look at the ways in which this imagery is transformed. Some of the recurrent examples from our research material illustrate how imagery is produced and spread as part of erotic, romantic or friendly relationships. Aligned with findings in the existing research literature, we also see how the produced imagery is subsequently spread for various reasons—thoughtlessly shared with others during the relationship, to build trust among a group of friends, or as part of a bonding process with other boys (Johansen et al., 2018), to brag (Crofts et al., 2015) etc. Sometimes these motives are mixed up with a sense of frustration or even anger. These practices—in both mundane and more abusive forms—are all fairly familiar to most young people.

However, sexualized digital imagery of these kinds tends to travel even further, into the more organized and systematized environments where websites, repositories and other storage platforms host comprehensive collections of imagery, which are often organized according to how the material was produced (creep shots, ex-girlfriend shots, Snapchat shots), where it was produced (locker-room shots, toilet shots, beach shots), the level of vulgarity (anal sex, group sex, including artifacts), or who the depicted are (celebrities, bloggers, from specific countries, cities or schools).

Young people's building of relationships and communities, including their inclusions and exclusions, are affected by these practices. Whether directly involved or as a bystander, uncertainty concerning who will be the next person depicted and circulated, and whether or when the image reaches one's own phone influence young people's communities and relationships. These kinds of social insecurities and uncertainties are well described in relation to sociocultural understandings of bullying (Hansen, Henningsen, &

Kofoed, 2014; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014). However, the entanglement of social processes, digitally designed conditions and technological affordances entails new and accelerated forms of subjective, social, and gendered uncertainties in young people's sexualized digital practices and spreading of imagery, and are also to be found in the tendency for these practices to tip over into harassment or extreme abuse.

### *Traveling imagery departing*

Whether sharing *sexy* selfies with specific individuals or groups, or posting them on their own social media profiles, the affordances and conditions provided by digital media enact uncertainties in relation to the further travel of young people's imagery. In our research material, many of the girls describe their experiences of how imagery spread to a wider audience than first intended. Sometimes, this occurs shortly after the first exchange:

I am in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and I sent a nude to my boyfriend, whom I trusted. But at school the next day, I realized that he had shared the image with my whole class. I got very upset and felt exploited and harassed. (14-year-old girl, helpline)

In other cases, the imagery *hibernates* for years, only to suddenly reappear online:

Time passed, and I did not think about the images anymore. Until one day when I was informed by one of my friends that most of the students from my year and the year above had received one or two images from the boy showing me without any clothes on. Furthermore, they were also sent to a group chat on Facebook, consisting of 10–12 of the boys from my class. (17-year-old girl, helpline)

In some situations, those depicted are not even aware of the existence of the imagery traveling around in the digital world because it was produced through hidden cameras in locker rooms, during sex, on the beach or in other exposed settings. For instance, one girl explains how she did not realize the image existed until a friend confronted her with it:

A couple of months ago, I was sleeping at a boy's house. There was nothing shady about it. But two months later, one of my classmates showed me a picture of me, taken from behind, only wearing underwear. It is easy to see that it was taken at that boy's house, and I have not been to his house since, so it cannot be from any other time. (15-year-old girl, helpline)

The uncertainties regarding when and in which contexts the imagery appears are enacted through these new technological conditions. Focusing on this unpredictability, Barad's concept of spacetimemattering becomes relevant. When time and space entangle with technological affordances, such as the way in which the digital design of various apps or platforms invites users to save images for later, then the imagery is decontextualized and new potentialities concerning who it is possible to be and become are enacted. Gender discourses emphasizing girls and their bodies as erotic investment potentials obviously

saturate the processes of this material-discursive intra-agency, and the complex processes of this whole apparatus end up effecting troubled positionings (Wetherell, 1998) for girls as well as boys.

The intimate relationship that is established through the exchange of sexualized images changes as the images spread. For example, in the interviews one boy described how a video of him having sex with a girl was merely some kind of trophy that he could show to his friends. Other boys have recounted committing to agreements within their peer group to send a sign and a picture whenever they were having sex. This act of loyalty functioned as a marker and confirmation of their bonding within the peer group.

In other situations and among other young people, the spreading of this material seems to function as a way of coping with the surprise or the feeling of being emotionally overwhelmed by the content of digital imagery—shocked by the people, the age or the nature of the actions depicted, as one girl explains:

One of my friends—a boy, whom I often talk to—sent me two pictures of my friend in a bra and hipsters. She sent him those pictures. I thought it was really gross and had to show it to four of my best friends. (14-year-old girl, helpline)

Interestingly enough, in both the research literature and in the public debate, these situations are often interpreted as explicit harassment rather than as a combination of multiple functions and intentions, as is the case with this girl who shares images as a way of reaching out for collective meaning-making in an attempt to cope with something shocking.

### *Digital platforms and their invitations*

The technological affordances (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017) of digital media spaces facilitate different types of participation, such as inviting particular forms of imagery to be produced and spread. The ephemerality of Snapchat, to take an example, seems to facilitate the proliferation of unpolished images (e.g., nudes) to a greater extent than the more permanent space of Instagram. Yet, as exemplified in the following quote, some young people tend to forget that imagery shared through Snapchat can become permanent if someone takes a screenshot:

When I was 11 years old, I was at my friend's house one day, and we were chatting with a boy on Snapchat. My friend encouraged me to send him an image of my boobs—and I did. He took a screenshot. (14-year-old girl, helpline)

Time and space work as unpredictable forces in these online practices. The sexualized imagery has the potential to matter, emerge, and disappear in unexpected ways, depending on the technological conditions and their intra-agency with gendered discourses positioning girls as potentially sexy and boys as inevitably wanting (Søndergaard, 2019a). These technological conditions are constantly re-emerging through intra-actions of

human and non-human agencies—they are constantly being developed, functions are changed, algorithms are adapted, and the users change their behavior on these platforms. This leads to unexpected situations in young people's practices. For example, one girl experienced this when it suddenly became possible for a boy to download an old video of her that she had sent him before that technological function had been implemented:

Now Snapchat has got a 'nice' function where you can download imagery directly from the chat to your photo archive. So after a while, the guy downloads the images and videos I sent him. Long ago, he saved them in the chat, but did not take a screenshot of the videos as that was not possible at that time. But now he has downloaded all of my videos in his photo archive. (20-year-old girl, helpline)

Sexualized digital imagery spreads rapidly through private smartphones, Facebook Messenger and Groups, Snapchat, Instagram and other social and digital media. Data from a Danish case show that sexualized digital imagery of young girls can reach 4000–5000 shares in a few days. The reach of imagery from larger countries is probably much higher. However, the spreading of images among young people in Denmark has recently become increasingly secret due to the massive publicity concerning the so-called Umbrella case, where more than 1000 young people (including approximately 200 girls) were charged with distributing child pornography after sharing a video of two 15-year-olds having rough sex.

In our interviews, the young people described how the relatively *closed* spaces of Facebook Messenger, where the Umbrella case material was shared, were perceived as a private space to share *stuff*. However, after several reports about the video being shared, Facebook started reporting the incidents of sharing to the police and blocking any further spreading of these videos, much to these young people's surprise. New potentialities and their mattering also emerged and transformed this space (Facebook Messenger) from being (perceived and used as) private to semi-public. In this sense, the online sites used by young people also break assumed contracts, expectations, and rules while elaborating on their affordances, with consequences not only for future involvement but also past activities.

As already mentioned, how the spaces are used also changes. As a result of Facebook paying greater attention to abusive and illegal material, the young people in our research material emphasized the necessity of using encrypted apps and private smartphone messages more frequently. Thus, although it might appear that the spreading of sexualized imagery has subsided, it may just have moved elsewhere. Several of the boys from our research material described how they had taken various actions after the Umbrella case, such as downloading an app that appears to be a calculator, but in fact provides secure storage for imagery. This prevents their images from being stolen or hacked by others and protects them from being forced by the authorities or friends to provide access to certain content on their phones. Eventually, much of the sexualized digital imagery produced and spread among young people travels across spaces and turns up in various kinds of online

repositories. In this way, the material re-emerges in organized sharing environments and matters in new ways before traveling to yet other sites. These practices are enacted in the entanglement of technology, discourses, and their gendered normativity—entangling with youth culture, desires, identity projects, and subject positionings.

These practices take different forms as part of young people's mundane digital interactions, continuously pushing—and sometimes transgressing—the normative boundaries and negotiating what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate gender positioning. This was also exemplified in our fieldwork, where the young people would describe the spreading of imagery as *normal, harmless, and expected*, but the next minute describing specific situations as *horrible, violating and mean*. The practices of producing and spreading this imagery carry endless potentialities of uncertainty and repositioning of those depicted—who produced it, who spread it, who saw it, and who received it remains indeterminate.

As in these processes, what constitutes appropriately *sexy* (but not *slutty*) girlness and appropriately *erotically assertive* (but not abusive) boyness are continuously negotiated, and fights are fought concerning potential positionings and *cool* ways of flirting.

### ***Negotiating the circumstances and navigating the imagery***

The sexualized digital imagery that young people produce and spread matters in varying ways as it travels through time and space. As already described, imagery might reappear and matter in a very concrete form if someone took a screenshot and saved it for later. In other cases, the material comes to matter through the stories that young people tell about the imagery or through the contexts that it appears in, leading to diverse negotiations of the circumstances through which the imagery was produced and spread.

In several of the interviews, we discussed the contemporary court cases involving young people engaged in the production and spreading of sexualized digital imagery, such as the Umbrella case (Søndergaard, 2019a). Listening to the ways in which the young people that we spoke to narrated and perceived the circumstances of such a case caught our attention. For the most part, their understanding of the circumstances differed markedly from the descriptions in the media of what had happened by the young people directly involved. For example, the young people in our interviews would focus the question of consent in many different ways in their discussions, never reaching any kind of agreement. Awareness, consent, wishes, and motives are constantly debated among the interviewees when talking about the Umbrella case and similar cases of sexualized digital imagery being produced and spread. While none of them knew, or would ever get to know, the exact circumstances, the potentiality entailed in the entangling technology, discourses, and involved subjectivities produces different forms of reality for the girls depicted in this imagery and in relation to gender normativity. Through these discussions of motives and circumstances, the meaning, mattering, and doings of gender were negotiated: what are appropriate girl and boy positionings? Who can legitimately do and

be what? Which acts and which kinds of exposure will effect what kind of respect (or lack thereof)? The potentialities of young people's sexualized digital imagery entangle with the technological conditions and the varying times and spaces through which the imagery emerges. However, these negotiations not only characterized the discussions about the circumstances and motives underlying already produced and spread material but they also infused in the young people's own navigation of imagery.

Across the interviews, most of the young people agreed that you should ask for permission before saving or taking a screenshot of an image that you have received. Nevertheless, when we talked about specific situations, several of the boys told us that they would store the imagery regardless of whether or not they were given permission by the girls that they had asked—and would sometimes not even ask permission. For example, when using Snapchat, the sender is notified when a screenshot is taken. However, some young people used the technology to work around this. In one case, a boy explained how he would put his phone into flight mode before opening a Snapchat to be able to take a screenshot without the sender being notified. Here, potentiality effects a form of *fake* certainty that the imagery has been deleted. However, this certainty only lasts until the imagery reappears.

Some of the gendered negotiations that take place through these practices are already emphasized in the existing research literature, for example emphasizing how girls are blamed far more often than boys if their sexualized digital imagery circulates in the digital world, no matter the circumstances of the production and spreading (Henry & Powell, 2015; Karaian, 2014; Salter, Crofts, & Lee, 2013). Moreover, imagery of girls is more often sexualized, leading to this imagery being ascribed a different and higher value than imagery of boys when images are spread (Salter, 2016). Salter argues that nudes depicting girls are inflicted with strong intensity and sexualized meaning, which is very different from nudes depicting boys. This also fuels the ever-increasing volume of imagery and the high speed at which these images travel, explaining why we almost only encountered imagery depicting female bodies during our digital ethnography. Occasionally, imagery of boys occurred. However, rather than being sexualized, this imagery tended to be conflated with humor, which one of the boys in our interviews also experienced:

One night, when I came home drunk, I was unaware that one of my balls had fallen out of my boxer shorts. My friend took a picture. He sent it to some friends and suddenly all of the boys had the image of my ball. And on my birthday, it was posted on my Facebook wall and everybody could see it. However, I chose to turn it into something positive instead of something negative and named it: 'The famous ball'. (17-year-old boy, interview)

In spite of the digital potentiality that enables infinite transformations and re-interpretations of imagery, we never found a similar example showing a humoristic and erotically de-intensifying move from a girl. A girl calling a nude spread without her consent *the famous tit* would most likely be received rather differently.

### *Transformations of the imagery*

As imagery travels in the boundless networks across online and offline spaces, and while the circumstances of its production and spreading are being debated, contested, and reinterpreted, the imagery may be transformed in yet other ways. The meaning and mattering of the original image, perhaps a humorous snap sent to a close friend, may change when it ends up being shared in social media groups with thousands of members, on YouTube channels, in Dropboxes, or on websites with already exposed collections of sexualized imagery.

In our research material, we encountered both imagery uploaded directly from someone's phone or computer and imagery that had moved from social media profiles or YouTube channels to more organized groups, folders, or platforms. The material was posted and spread by different, and most often unknown, persons, sometimes under the cover of fake social media profiles pretending to *belong* to the depicted person. These possibilities of moving and archiving reach into and displace the perception of *time*. What was *past* may now be presented as *recent* or *present*, potentially leading into *future*. In these cases, although the girl depicted was not defined as a *whore* when the image was first shared, its reappearance and repetitive and widespread exposure make the potentiality of her being viewed as a *whore* matter. The digital spreading produces her as a *whore*, apparently proved by the spreading of the imagery in the digital and the analogue world. Technology, discourses, and the enabled manipulations of space-time enacted by their entangling may in this sense rework the identity, the potential positioning, and the access to legitimate being and becoming of the depicted youth in dramatic ways.

During these processes, the boundaries of *the past* evaporate and, assisted by the entanglement of digital potentials and gendered discourses, this past reaches into the present and the future, and destabilizes what had mattered beforehand. In this sense, young people's social practices are infused by the technology and, through the imagery, are also materialized as a possible future. Their identities and positionings are forever left open to interpretation and transformation.

The organized online spaces that compile, buy, sell, and exchange imagery can be more or less centered on a particular community and its inherent relationships. The community-centered spaces are often to be found on existing social media—in Facebook groups, through Instagram hashtags or profiles, and in debates on sites like Reddit—where sexualized digital imagery proliferates alongside other norm-challenging or taboo-breaking behavior and opinions, such as Nazi symbols, racist jokes, and offensive memes (see Nagle, 2017 for an analysis of these practices). The content that we encountered in these places consisted of various kinds of images, texts, emoticons, and their combinations, including sexualized imagery posted as part of the comprehensive digital interactions among young people. As commercial social media have come under pressure to censor illegal and harassing visual material (for media discussions of specific cases see for example: Dalgas, 2019; Taylor, 2019; Waterson, 2019), we have encountered a decreasing



volume of visual material in these places. Instead, posts with hyperlinks to external sites increasingly seemed to be preferred. However, we did find older groups that were used to spread nudes five years ago. Although these groups did not seem to be in active use, the images were still archived and accessible—probably because Facebook was not as consistent then regarding the censorship of nudes as they are now.

Imagery in the organized but more community-centered environments is often posted and commented upon by group members and, if public, by everyone. Occasionally, the girls whose nudes were being evaluated were invited to the groups or sent a link to their imagery and the attached digital interactions—possibly as a way of provoking a reaction or as an act of targeted harassment. One of the girls in our interviews describes such a situation:

They used to have a group where everything was posted. Then Oliver had something with Julie, and then Julie was invited to see everything in the group, and there were images as well as videos of all of us. (17-year-old girl, interview)

Other platforms are exclusively focused on sexualized digital imagery. These sites are also dedicated to dialogues, chats and discussions about the material, its quality, the embodied sensation it invokes, the potentials associated with looking at it, etc. On some sites, the commentaries are carefully organized and the content is sorted into distinct categories. This kind of organization was also found in the Dropboxes, Google Drives, and imageboards, as exemplified in this anonymized screenshot of a Dropbox with multiple folders named after girls from specific towns (see pg. 93).

The practices differ among the various sites and platforms. In some spaces, the focus is on the amount of imagery being posted; in some, specific types of imagery are the focal point; and in others it is the interaction around the imagery that attracts users, whether actively participating or lurking. A common practice that we encountered across semi-organized imageboards is users moving *innocent* imagery of girls (e.g., a holiday bikini-photo) from an Instagram profile on to these platforms. These posts are often accompanied with comments about the girls' looks, requests for nude images of them, or questions about their identities or contact information. One girl explained this experience, when seeking help:

Late in 2016, someone created a fake profile and sent me pictures of me, which I took myself but never sent to anyone. [...] Last night, someone added me on Snapchat by using my username, and so I thought to myself that it must be someone I know since this person knew my username. The person starts out by sending me a nude of myself, with my hand covering my lower body. I took the picture as part of my weight loss journey in order to see my progress. I ask the person where they got the picture from, and the person replies that it was found in an online folder with multiple pictures of me and other girls—accompanied by our full names and Snapchat usernames. (19-year-old girl, helpline)

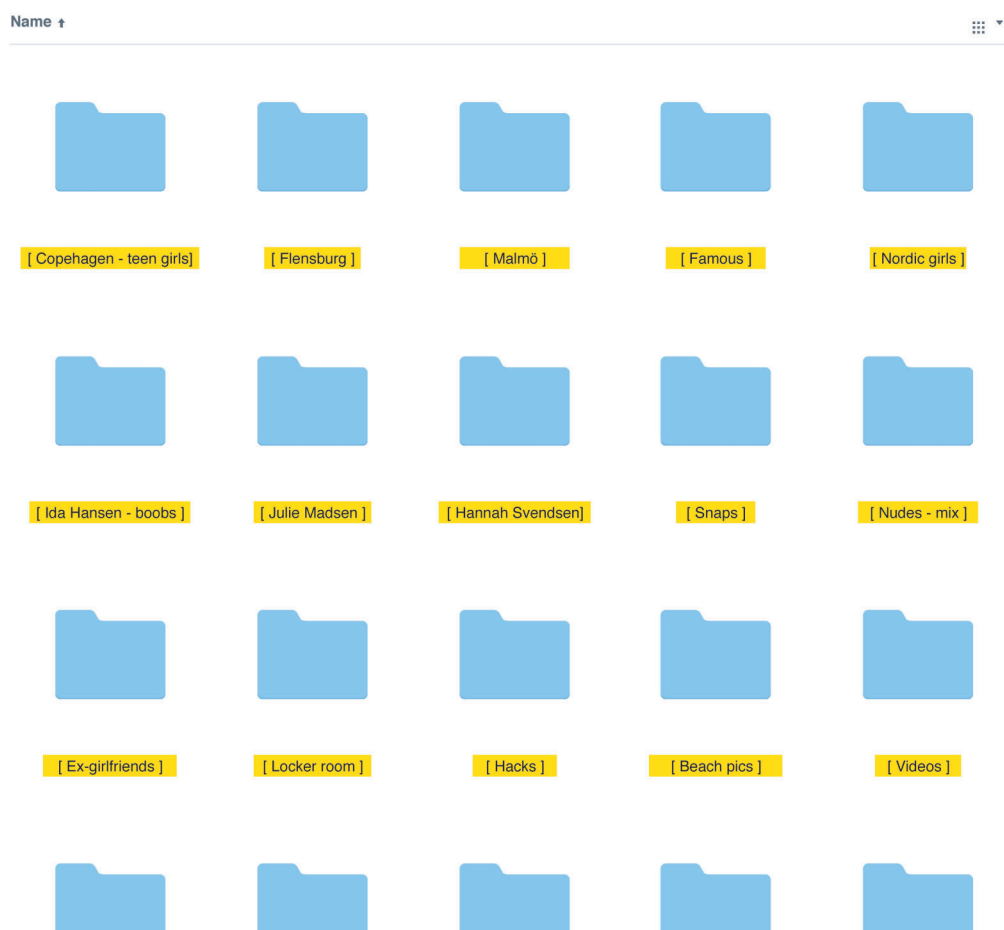


Figure 1 A anonymized screenshot of a Dropbox with multiple folders of imagery of girls

Again, spacetime mattering demands analytical attention. Time and space are flexible here. The imagery being spread might be quite old, but it can be awakened at any time and start re-mattering when posted anew on new sites somewhere online. Furthermore, potential future imagery can also be brought to life. Many comments and responses on these sites center on requests for imagery depicting particular persons from particular neighborhoods, cities, or schools. A targeted request for imagery of something or someone may encourage a hack of someone's email, a camera being installed in a toilet, or someone secretly recording during sexual interaction.

People's comments and posts of additional imagery are infused with the powerful potentialities of the technology. The identifying information provided might or might not relate to the person depicted and nudes without faces might or might not be of the person named. We have found examples of this throughout our research material. In the digital ethnography, the same images reappear in multiple folders under different names

and cities, and in our interviews one of the girls described how she had been confused with someone else:

There was a picture in that group of two naked girls in a bathroom—and they said it was meant to be me and Olivia. It was maybe two friends. However, the problem is that the depicted girls are overweight. It is clear that they are overweight. And I am not really overweight at all—so it cannot be me. (17-year-old girl, interview)

Whether the image depicts this girl or not, the potentiality works and enacts a different reality. It positions her, produces unease, threatens to label her in particular ways, and may result in unsettling invitations and attempts to contact her—or it may be used to portray someone else that looks like her.

Across the many different sites and platforms, we found that many different strategies are used to prove the authenticity of images and connect them to the allegedly depicted girls. One such strategy can be to post the nudes without faces along with portraits of the allegedly depicted girl to verify that it is the same girl. Another strategy is to post the nudes including part of the *frame* from which they were taken (e.g., a visible Snapchat name, the Snapchat timer or part of a Facebook profile), which functions as proof of the existence of a real person. Obviously, the subjective and social effects of these connections can be far-reaching.

## Concluding remarks

As the analysis shows, young people's production and spread of sexualized digital imagery are entangled practices that move in boundless networks of human and non-human forces and intra-agencies. Through these movements, the borders between relatively mundane, generally accepted practices and hardcore, abusive practices become blurred. Space and time transcend ordinary definitions and escape any sense of linearity and demarcation. Their mattering remains open-ended in these digital-discursive processes. What emerges and what is made invisible, what is brought into the future and what is left in the past remain indeterminate and are infused by the potentialities and the constantly shifting mattering as the imagery is produced, shared, and deleted, before perhaps reappearing in new contexts with new audiences. However, the gendered discourses highlighting the bodies of young women and the potential erotic investment in those bodies as the focal point of all these practices is an aspect that, in all the material-discursive entanglement, seems to remain remarkably stable across all this traveling and transformation, and across all of the efforts to produce and re-contextualize imagery and argue for its authenticity.

The unpredictability and open-endedness of time and space therefore also tend to freeze some people in the midst of all this movement. To freeze them in time and space and leave them unable to return to who they were before they were exposed through

sexualized digital imagery. No matter the volatility and opaque character of the traveling and spreading, the effects for the young people involved are in that sense indisputable. For some, the effects are devastating; for all, they infiltrate conditions for becoming, for subject positioning, for building relations and influencing normativities, grounding respect and inclusion, disrespect and exclusion.

These new digital practices lead to renewed terms for negotiating what it means and what it should mean to be young, and not least what it means to be young in gendered social and digital communities. In our material, we see negotiations of potential identities and of their appropriateness. How much skin can be exhibited? By who? Sent to whom? Shared where? And by whom? Which bodies get admired? Exposing how much skin? Where is the tipping point from being considered *hot* to being defined as a *whore*? And which bodies seem immune to the latter definition? Which bodies and which subject positionings have access to which kinds of defense strategies—humor, irony, moral judgment, a call for (legal) help? And what social effects does the use of these defense strategies imply? For whom are they legitimate and effective? For whom do they lead to further shaming, exclusion, and labeling?

The field also entails never-ending negotiations about the potentiality of digital technology, and the conditions and affordances that it offers. In this article, we see how these processes have been specifically led through negotiations concerning digital imagery—including its authenticity, the motives for its production, the potential for faking, reconstructing, or manipulating images. Imagery produced in one space and time may be reinterpreted in light of later posts of imagery depicting (or purporting to depict) the same person, turning sympathy and even admiration into contempt and hatred. Rumors, known or unknown digital representation, are trapped in the whirl of intense evaluation—no one is outside the reach of these digital practices. Therefore, whether at the center or the periphery of these practices, and of the negotiations and sense-making of various forms of imagery as they travel across sites, are consumed, interpreted, and evaluated, they affect all young people and their material-discursive conditioning of being and becoming.

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## Article: Traveling imagery

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## Article: Traveling imagery

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## Notes

- 1 Spreading, theorized by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), refers to a "hybrid model of circulation" of media content (p. 1). We draw on their definition of spreading as: "a shift from distribution to circulation that signals a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people, who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" (p. 2).
- 2 Barad (2007) 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. Following this line of thinking, she replaces the concept of interaction with intra-action.

## Article: Traveling imagery

- 3 A few studies have used digital methods in relation to this topic (e.g. Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; Renold & Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013), offering analyses about young people's sexualized digital cultures on specific apps and platforms. These studies have, however, stayed with the immediate interaction among young people and refrained from moving further into the digital spaces tracing such kinds of material across sites or across online and offline spaces – neither have they focused how the imagery is transformed in the process.
- 4 In a poststructuralist empirical tradition, the concept of positioning was originally developed to focus on the discursive production of selves (Davies, 2000; Davies & Harré, 1990). In our analytical endeavors, it draws attention to the entangled material-discursive production of the subject and subjectivity (Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011).
- 5 The term 'private' can seem rather vague in digital spaces, as it is defined very differently depending on the specific context. This is part of broader discussions about the blurry distinction between private and public in digital spaces - discussions with which we will not engage in this article (see for example Elm, 2009).

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