

## “Tailored pornography”

### Content, context and consent in young women’s sexting

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#### **Abstract**

*Drawing on 17 qualitative interviews with women aged 18–22, this paper explores how sexting practices are related to views on and uses of pornography. While pornography was found to be an important reference point for participants in their sexting, sexted images were actively tailored to differentiate themselves from porn in three ways. First, private images were to be less explicit and more realistic in terms of content. Second, unlike pornography, which was seen as one-sided, sexting relied on reciprocity and intimacy. Third, participants were careful to explicitly state what they were consenting to when sexting and, although a few were turned on by coercive fantasies found in porn, they clearly demarcated such experiences from those they wanted in their sexting relationships. This paper examines women’s active engagement with pornography to extend our understanding of the relationship between sexting and mundane media use, specifically in this case pornography.*

## Introduction

This paper provides an analysis of the relationship between pornography and sexting in young women's lives. Since Denmark's legalisation of sexually explicit material half a century ago, pornography has been argued to pervade the mainstream cultural sphere. This has led to concerns about the 'pornification' of young people's lives today (Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007; Spišák, 2017). In her snapshot of American culture in 2005, Ariel Levy proposed that:

Our nation's love of porn and pole dancing is not a byproduct of a free and easy society with an earthy acceptance of sex. It is a desperate stab at freewheeling eroticism in a time and place characterized by intense anxiety. What are we afraid of? Everything...which includes sexual freedom and *real* female power. (2005, p. 193)

Since then, the Internet and mobile phones have facilitated the availability of new erotic practices such as sexting, understood as "the exchange of sexually-explicit material via technology" (Drouin, 2018, p. 68). When young women pose for their own nude images, it can be argued that they are objectifying themselves (Hasinoff, 2013) and that pornography has become the new normal (Mulholland, 2013). However, we rarely ask women how they feel about porn, what they like and dislike about pornography and how these preferences might influence their sexting practices. This paper seeks to nuance the debate about the links between sexting and pornography by examining how women's mundane consumption experiences of porn might be shaping how they sext. Drawing on interviews with 17 young women who sext with men, we argue that young women are actively engaging with pornography in their everyday lives, while ensuring that their sexting practices are differentiated from pornography in quite specific ways.

## Previous literature on sexting and pornography

Sexting has been understood as rooted in everyday practices, ranging from sexual desire, flirtation and experimentation to boredom, pranks and jokes (Englander, 2012; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone, & Harvey, 2012; Walker, Sancı, & Temple-Smith, 2013; Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014; Burkett, 2015; Charteris, Gregory, & Masters, 2018). Although these are all important aspects, we lack knowledge about how sexting, as a new media practice, intersects with other mundane uses of media. In this paper, we are particularly interested in the relationship between sexting and pornography, one that remains relatively unexplored in the literature. There are a few exceptions, but crucially these studies conceptualise pornography at a general level: as a symbolic discourse (Ringrose, 2011), as an item in a survey instrument (Van Ouytsel, Ponnet, & Walrave, 2014), or as "frames" in "ordinary language" (Amundsen, 2019, p. 490). Amundsen's (2019) recent article explicitly notes the resistance that exists within the research field towards acknowledging that social understandings of pornography are integral to how women make sense of sexting.

Amundsen (2019) thus argues that women's sexting must be understood in relation to conventions of "pornonormativity" and that even without being asked about pornography, the women in her study explained sexting "as an alternative to pornography that enabled the women to both mimic and challenge that which pornography can do" (pp. 485-486).

Nevertheless, neither of the above-mentioned studies focuses on women's consumption of pornographic films, an area that has scarcely been explored (Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2018). Therefore, this paper directly tackles this gap by analysing sexting in relation to how pornography is used and evaluated by young women themselves. We aim to explain 'what people do with porn' (Attwood, 2005) and specifically how women differentiate their porn experiences from their sexting practices.

### **Sexting**

In Denmark, 17 percent of 12- to 25-year-olds have "sent or posted a sexual image/video of [oneself, e.g. in] underwear or naked" (Harder, Jørgensen, Gårdshus, & Demant, 2019, p. 212). Sexting research is an emerging field in which a range of definitions have appeared due to the broad content encompassed within sexting (e.g. sexually suggestive, semi-nude or nude images), the media used for sexting and the contexts in which sexting takes place (Drouin, Vogel, Surbey, & Stills, 2013; Strohmaier et al., 2014; Walker & Sleath, 2017; Englander & McCoy, 2018). In addition to the inconsistencies identified in the quantitative measures used to date, qualitative findings have problematised the concept of sexting by arguing that it focuses too narrowly on what adults understand as 'sexual' (Anastassiou, 2017). Indeed, to understand young people's engagements with sexting as a medium of communication, scholars have stressed the rich variety, types of intimacies and even humour found in sexts (Albury, 2015; Renfrow, Kucewicz, Mouradian, & Schweigert, 2017).

Although the term 'sexting' is generally used in reference to consensual image exchange (Johansen, Pedersen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2018), the vast majority of sexting research examines the risks of non-consensual forwarding of teenagers' sexts (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Drouin, 2018). The research on sexting as a risk behaviour is often understood from a gendered perspective and highlights how the practice is influenced by sexual double standards, where girls' and boys' sexual activity is judged differently: young men are understood as successfully masculine in their sexting behaviour, whereas young women are morally sanctioned for practising explicit sexuality (Hasinoff, 2013). Scholars have contended that these double standards lead to victim blaming, slut-shaming, trauma and, in some cases, suicide (Hasinoff, 2013; Walker et al., 2013; Strohmaier et al., 2014; Penhollow, Young, & Nnaka, 2017). The concept of 'image-based sexual abuse' stresses that non-consensual image production and sharing is a crime, related to the continuum of other forms of sexual violence (Kelly, 2013; Powell & Henry, 2017a). The concept was developed to counter terms such as "revenge porn" and "non-consensual pornography", because "the term 'porn' tends to instil a sense of choice and

legitimacy that is inappropriate when debating the creation and/or distribution of sexual images without consent" (McGlynn & Rackley, 2017, p. 536). Excluding pornography from definitions of non-consensual image sharing risks conceptually juxtaposing the two, even though they are not necessarily distinct in practice. This can be seen in cases where sexts are shared non-consensually on websites for commercial porn (Maddocks, 2018). The crossover from sexting to pornography by way of non-consensual sharing has been researched by, for example, Henry and Powell (2015, see also Powell & Henry, 2017b) and Amundsen (2019). However, in this article we take a step back to ascertain if and how the consensual practices of sexting and pornography are interlinked. We thus focus on how women use their experiences with and preferences in pornography when creating sexts. Due to this re-positioning of our contribution, we argue that it is appropriate to draw on literature from porn studies to first situate our paper, but also second to gain conceptual inspiration so as to inform our analytical approach.

### ***Pornography***

Pornography scholarship inhabits a contested space in academia and in political activism (Williams, 1989; Smith & Attwood, 2014). One segment of the literature provides evidence of the harmful consequences of pornography, emphasising causal links to, for example, harassment and interpersonal violence (DeKeseredy, 2015; Jensen, 2007). Theoretically, these studies build on the contributions of radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 2002; Segal, 1993), who in 1985 co-authored "city ordinances (subsequently ruled unconstitutional) that attempted to define pornography as the 'sexually explicit subordination of women' and thus as a violation of women's civil rights" (Williams, 1989, p. 24; see also Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Levy, 2005). The anti-porn position is actively refuted by another body of scholarship, which finds that pornography can also empower women sexually (Ciclitira, 2004). Building on the latter strand of literature, newer research has turned to theories of affect to describe porn as a leaky, sticky material which causes sensuous, tactile and subconscious experiences of both pleasure and shame (Paasonen, 2011).

Meanwhile, more recent qualitative studies of women's porn usage point to a middle ground between the two feminist positions on the topic (Gurevich et al., 2017; Chadwick, Raisanen, Goldey, & van Anders, 2018; Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2019). Studies from Australia, Canada and the United States show that women use and engage with pornography in different ways and highlight women's particular preferences and dislikes (Gurevich et al., 2017). On the one hand, women may seek out pornography and find it arousing, especially genres where actors display intimacy towards one another and which offer diverse representations of bodies (Ashton et al., 2018). However, research has also found that women do adopt anti-pornography positions and frequently criticise both the way porn actresses are treated by the industry and the lack of authenticity of the body images displayed in mainstream porn (Ciclitira, 2004; Chadwick et al., 2018). Nevertheless,

all of these accounts describe porn as being so widely available that it has an unavoidable influence in women's lives, even if some do not actively consume it. This influence is not understood as a one-way street where "pornography is damaging our lives" (Paul, 2005) or "has hijacked our sexual culture" (Dines, 2010). Rather, studies recognise that users' experiences matter for how various media products are combined, adapted and challenged through mundane practices (Sandvik, Thorhauge, & Valtysson, 2016; Ashton et al., 2019).

The mainstreaming of pornographic sex has been termed 'pornification', which describes the blurring of boundaries between pornography and mainstream culture through technology (Attwood, 2005; Paasonen et al., 2007). Pornification has historically caused public concern, specifically that the fantasies depicted in pornography will become the "new normal" for young people's sexuality (Mulholland, 2013, p. 59). Indeed,

theories of sexualization and pornification of culture draw heavily on anti-pornography activism but with a very specific person in mind: the girl. In her they imagine a subject pure of pornography's violent assaults but who is perpetually at risk of losing her true sexuality to its perverse seductions. (Sullivan & McKee, 2015, pp. 76-77)

To refute the public panic about porn's corruption of female sexuality, scholars argue that pornification does not lead to an "anything goes" situation within contemporary sexual practices (Mulholland, 2015, p. 115). Rather, the mainstreaming of porn opens up possibilities for new forms of 'sexual play', which are constantly being negotiated in relation to existing norms (Paasonen, 2018). Thus, porn represents an everyday, tangible material with which viewers can engage to explore their own likes and dislikes (Wilson-Kovacs, 2009). It is this critical question – whether and how there is the possibility for agency in the way young women engage with porn – that our paper seeks to contribute to. We aim to do this through concretely exploring sexting practices in relation to women's uses of and perspectives towards porn.

## Method and data

The study is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with 17 women aged 18–22 who have a history of sexting in casual relationships with men. This population was selected to address the issue of pornography in heterosexual women's lives, which has been problematised by feminist scholarship (Williams, 1989). This study focuses specifically on young adults, as a large percentage of this group has been shown to sext, yet their sexting practices have been studied less than those of younger populations (Renfrow & Rollo, 2014). Interviews were conducted between October 2017 and March 2018 and, with the informants' permission, they were audio-recorded and transcribed (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). The participants were recruited via Tinder, which is a smartphone application designed to facilitate meet-ups both online and offline. Previous research has emphasised that Tinder is used for seeking different types of relationships, including both long-term

and casual ones (Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2017; Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). However, sexting outcomes have been shown to vary across relationship types, as those who sext within casual relationships are found to experience the most negative consequences (Drouin, 2018). To address such concerns, we chose to focus on sexting in new or short-term relationships.

We created profiles on Tinder, which clearly stated that we were seeking informants for interviews about sexting, including details about the study and a description of how we would ensure anonymity. Recruiting participants via a dating application such as Tinder offers various advantages (see also Demant, Bakken, Oksanen, & Gunnlaugsson, 2019, for a similar app-based recruiting strategy). Indeed, a digital application facilitates more diverse recruitment than snowball or network sampling (Small, 2009). Accordingly, our research participants represented a range of young women: employees, college students and some who were unemployed. Nevertheless, our sample also contained important biases. First, previous studies have described those who use the Internet to find casual partners as more sexually permissive and sensation-seeking, so it was possible that our participants were also more likely to consume pornography (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007). Second, few were from minority ethnic backgrounds. Third, Tinder is a geographically targeted app, so most of our participants were based in Copenhagen, although four of the 17 lived outside the capital. However, given that our study is exploratory, we do not believe that these limitations dilute the conceptual development offered here. Furthermore, a very real benefit of using Tinder to research this sensitive subject (McCormack, 2014; Condie, Lean, & James, 2018; Ward, 2019) was that the app enabled potential participants to make and break contact relatively freely. Those who were interested in joining the study could connect with the researchers to ask further questions and only reveal personal information if and when they decided they wanted to participate (Seymour, 2001).

The interview discussion guide focused on the creation, sharing and receipt of sexual images, including but not limited to examining the gendered dynamics and risks associated with the practice. The interviews additionally elicited narratives detailing the informants' uses of pornography in order to understand the relationship between everyday experiences with sexting and their views towards and consumption of pornography. Once the interviews had been fully transcribed, they were inductively coded using the qualitative software program NVivo. The initial coding comprised only three codes: *pornography*, *sexting* and *comparisons* (Dey, 1993). In the subsequent stage of the analysis, we examined the codes on pornography and sexting more closely and developed sub-codes that related to everyday practices (how is pornography consumed/how are sexts produced and exchanged) and normative statements (what are experienced as the advantages and disadvantages of sexting and pornography, respectively). In our findings below, we first offer a descriptive analysis of the women's varying experiences with sexting and porn, examining how these can be understood as everyday practices. In the second part of the findings section we focus on the third code, which extracted data that explicitly or implic-

itly compared porn and sexting. Within this code, we found that participants' statements could be grouped around 'three c's': *content* (how are the images in sexting and pornography different or alike), *context* (how do the social practices of watching pornography and engaging in sexting compare) and *consent* (how do women decode and manage risks in sexual images).

## Sexting practices

In explaining their practices of producing intimate images during the interviews, the young women detailed how they posed, what they wore and where they shot their images. The poses the participants chose were meant to show off their bodies from the best angle: bending one leg makes the bottom stand out, while taking the shot from above makes the face look slimmer. The preferred attire for a sexted image was described as "cute underwear" (Katja), or a towel or bedcover draped around the body, all of which could be used to enhance favourite body parts while hiding those about which they were shy. The setting for the images – bedrooms, dressing rooms or bathrooms – was chosen based on which had the best mirror, implying that the woman would enhance the angle of the body they were hoping to highlight, either the front, side or back. After taking the images, the editing process began: by adding filters, emojis or text, the women digitally enhanced their appearances until they were satisfied with how they were portrayed in the image.

Linda specifically explained how the creation of images was a way for her to celebrate her success in losing weight, capturing something of which she was proud:

And then I wanted to lose weight, and it wasn't that I was slim at the time, but I was losing weight. And I was like: 'Hey, I look good' and I was satisfied with what I saw in some way, or happy about it. And in a way I felt like, like I said, I was proud of what I had sent out, 'Hey I look good!' Of course if I look back now I might be a little like 'Ah, probably shouldn't have done it', but yeah, ehm... I think it's more when I looked at that image and thought 'I look good' then I was always happy about it. I never thought I sent out something which I felt was crossing my own limits.

In this quotation, Linda juxtaposes what she feels about herself with what others might see. She stresses that the most important aspect is that she feels good about her own appearance, even though she later worried that others might not see her in the same way. She also asserts that she keeps the image creation within her limits and the preferences with which she is comfortable. Thus, the production of images that are sexted appeared to be in large part for her own pleasure and needs.

For other participants, it was the feedback in the form of compliments that was particularly desired through the sexting process. Vibeke described sexting as "flattering images", both because she wanted to feel that she looked good in them and because she

used them to elicit compliments. Compliments from partners were described as a means of feeling good about one's own body without requiring much effort:

You know I will send them to get a nice reaction, and then I go: 'OK, awesome', you know that they like it. And then I don't think that much more about it [laughs]. It just adds to the self-confidence account and then 'Nice'. (Maya)

Here, Maya describes self-confidence as something that needs "a refill" from time to time, with sexting representing a way to receive feedback that makes her feel good about herself. Maya and Vibeke thus underlined how easy it is to attain positive feedback from men through sexting. Other participants criticised how this hunt for compliments is rooted in women's insecurities about themselves. Some distinguished between the kinds of compliments received. These participants preferred men to respond in a non-overtly sexualised manner:

I wouldn't want the kind of reaction like 'I want to fuck you'. I mean that wouldn't, I would find that really unappealing, you know. But something like, I think, it's OK to keep it a bit 'cheesy'. 'You are pretty'-like. Or 'Oh, you are so beautiful' and 'You look nice'. (Katja)

Katja's preference for non-sexually-explicit reactions can be seen as aligning with the women's descriptions of how their sexted images should look, using phrases such as "soft" or "nice" (Sofie) or "innocent" and "leaving something for the imagination" (Ida).

### ***Relations and risks***

According to our participants, sexting takes place in various mundane settings: when coming out of the shower, before going to bed, or when going to the bathroom at a party. One might sext while drunk, when missing one's partner, or simply when bored. Sexting can occur just about anywhere and part of the interest in engaging in such a practice is that one can receive almost immediate feedback. In the quotation below, Sara highlights that sexting is an everyday practice in which she might be engaged one minute before moving onto something else the next:

[...If] I don't want [to sext] anymore, or if I suddenly get hungry, then I drop it, then I make some spaghetti or whatever I want to eat, right? Then it's just the way it is. Then it's just sad for that person. He must wait. Again, they cannot expect anything from me.

In this way, she feels in charge and comfortable being sexual one moment and cooking the next. The feeling of control over the process of sexting was a recurring theme throughout Sara's interview and those of others (e.g. Sofie, Cecilie and Lise). Several of the women noted that sexting gave them a sense of power because they could capture their partner's attention and elicit a sexual response from him.

With sexual partners, sexting was seen as serving several functions. It could be used to build up sexual tension before a physical meeting. Others emphasised that sexting with



a partner only occurs once they have been intimate in person. The nature of the relationship also tended to influence the level of nudity and the extent to which an image is staged. In closer relationships, women appeared more relaxed about the construction of the images posted and the extent to which they were identifiable. Meanwhile, with more short-term or casual partners, participants usually took greater precautions to minimise the risk of being identifiable, in case the images were non-consensually shared.

One strategy for minimising the risk of image-based sexual abuse was to sext via apps that would erase the images immediately (such as Snapchat). Participants explained that if they found out that their partners had screenshot an image, they would explicitly demand that it be deleted:

And then I tell them: 'Excuse me. What are you doing? Why did you take my picture? If I told you you could save it, then you could save it, but I didn't give you permission, my consent, for you to have that image on your phone. Because I can't know where it's at in five months' time'. And I didn't – I mean I never send my face – but still it's my image going round and I don't have...control over where it goes. (Anne)

While several interview participants explained how they asserted control over sexting relationships, others experienced that they were pressured into sending images about which they felt uncomfortable and/or that these images had been spread non-consensually, prompting them to stop sexting for a while. Although abuse had completely deterred some from sexting, others had taken up sexting again but now implemented more safety measures.

## Pornography preferences

The participants defined pornographic images as depicting explicit nudity, sexual intercourse or other sexual forms of touching. Some women used genres such as amateur, fetish or feminist porn, which they juxtaposed with mainstream Internet porn:

It's more of a tribute to the body and ehm, where you like can explore your body and... There are also other kinds of porn, but that is again a more artistic way of doing it and on the other hand you have all this sites like Porn Hub and...Redtube and what do I know, where it's just like, where it goes batshit crazy, which is super unnatural. (Sofie)

Professional female pornographic actors in for-profit productions were seen as over-stylized and as displaying stereotypical body images with surgically enhanced features. Linda specifically juxtaposed "unnatural bodies" in porn with the "everyday bodies" of women with "larger bosoms, larger butts" and therefore preferred to watch porn where the actresses represent greater ethnic and cultural diversity. Thus, mainstream pornography was regarded as inauthentic and stereotypical, with the interviewed women who use pornography reporting having to search widely to find pornographic images they like. Those

who had been introduced to porn through male partners considered it unappealing and had decided against using pornography based on that experience. Others described how female friends would advise them where to find porn that could be used for inspiration in relation to particular sexual practices (e.g. how to perform oral sex). In such situations, porn was deemed instructive, but not necessarily arousing.

The women who reported using porn for sexual arousal actively sought it out themselves. These women described using pornography "all the time, actually, every time I masturbate" (Anne) by browsing Internet pages where they could find the specific genres most suited to their particular preferences. Online, women could filter clips according to categories they wanted to watch and fast-forward to their preferred parts. Browsing in incognito windows made them feel safe and anonymous online and using their phones while in bed was described as convenient when surfing for porn for the purposes of masturbation.

### *Fantasy and critique*

The women in this study thought of mainstream porn as purely sexual material that lacks "intimacy" and "personality" (Mia). Some of the participants therefore found it "boring", "tacky" and unattractive "to see people grope each other" (Katja). For some, sexual acts depicted in porn were seen as extreme, monotone, unnatural and disconnected from the kind of sex the women wanted to have themselves. For others, however, this quite different portrayal of sexuality invoked a series of fantasies:

And I think it's very much about fantasies, where the Internet gives you the opportunity to explore all these different fantasies, like those things you wouldn't really talk to your friends about, or like you wouldn't really dare to imagine, uh, then it kind of sneaked up on the screen. (Vibeke)

Porn in this case allowed for a secret peek into a different world marked by public taboo. As fantasy material, porn was not supposed to be real; rather, it opened up sexual opportunities beyond one's wildest imagination. For example, Maya explained that the latest example of Internet porn she liked showed a woman who was asleep when a man started to caress her. Even though the man had not sought the woman's consent in the narrative, she appeared to be turned on by him, and when she woke up, they had sex, which she enjoyed. What Maya liked about this particular clip was both that it risked being abusive and that it ended up displaying female pleasure. While Maya underlined the pleasure in seeing a fantasy that fetishises a passive woman, others explicitly called for feminist porn in which the female actor takes the lead:

I think you ought to have more porn that doesn't just have the man in focus – where it's not only about the body of the woman, which becomes about how the man has sex with the woman – but also where it's about how the woman has sex with the man. (Ronja)

Ronja explicitly took a feminist stance towards what she viewed as the exploitation of women in the porn industry, referencing the human trafficking, objectification and grooming of women who would later regret their participation in porn.

## **Sexting contra pornography**

We have so far described in separate sections how our participants defined, produced and managed sexting practices as well as why and how the young women used or refused to engage with pornography. In this section, we consider how the practices are inter-linked, arguing that women draw on their experiences with pornography when they sext regarding three dimensions: content, context and consent. Moreover, we show how sexting as a practice is both informed by and stands in opposition to experiences with pornography (Amundsen, 2019).

### ***Content: realism and explicitness***

When describing the content of the sexted images, the women in our study juxtaposed them with pornographic images in two ways. First, the bodies in pornography were considered artificial and plastically enhanced, which made them appear unrealistic:

When I send something, then it's totally natural, compared to porn, which is set up and it's all fake. I have heard that it's artificial sperm and all sorts of things. There isn't anything real about it. My images, they are real. (Lise)

When comparing her own body to the bodies depicted in mainstream porn, Lise thus took pride in her own body being natural: she laughed out loud as she described that her breasts "came from her mum", whereas she believed the porn actresses probably got theirs from a surgeon. Lise's reservations towards what she deemed "fake" pornographic bodies resonate well with previous literature, which has described women's criticisms of porn's portrayal of stereotypical bodies (Frith, 2015). Indeed, in an early study using focus group discussions about "top-shelf" magazines, Boynton (1999) stated that "women's conversations included their own 'natural' sexuality: which frequently conflicted with what they saw in the magazines" (p. 451). With the emergence of the Internet, female consumers of porn are seeking out alternative genres that present a wider variety of female bodies (Chadwick et al., 2018), in line with Linda's interest in porn actresses who represent the same ethnic background as her. In Lise's quotation, however, we can see how this preference also translates into a practice where self-produced images favour representations of the body that are considered realistic and therefore more authentic than porn. The content of the sexted images is produced as a counterpoint to what she considers a pornified body image.

The second important difference between the content found within porn and in sexts is their level of explicitness. Porn was associated with genitals being displayed "very direct, very out in the open" (Katja), whereas sexting entailed nudity but greater subtlety:

But it's also like...you know it can't be too obvious, where you are trying to show off your genitals, like. I don't know how to explain it but it has to be like... You are hiding, like. Or like 'low key' [laughs...] Hm. Yeah. You know more subtle, it's not like: 'Come fuck me', with spread legs and like [...] I feel like, when you start showing your genitals then it becomes more pornographic. Whereas if you don't do that, then it's just erotic in some way or another. (Maya)

By limiting the explicitness of the content, Maya here emphasises how she resists pornographic connotations in her sexting and stays within (what she considers) the appropriate line of "erotic" images (by never being "completely naked"). Kirstine similarly referred to her sexting as "softcore", while Sara claimed that "sexting is definitely a little porno. But I do a lot to keep it aesthetically nice or beautiful". This supports previous sexting research (Renfrow & Rollo, 2014) describing how sexters regard explicitness in sexting as risky. In addition, some women link limited explicitness and nudity to the production of a more appealing "erotic expression" (Ida).

By underlining the links between women's porn preferences and their sexting practices, with images that are deemed realistic and subtle being preferred in both cases, we argue that sexting for these women corresponds with what they would like to see and consume when watching porn. The "flattering images" in sexting can be understood as an attempt to communicate the participants' self-constructed portrayals of themselves and their sexuality. This finding is in line with Hasinoff's (2013) conceptualisation of sexting as a form of media production through which girls and women express themselves and challenge unequal gender norms. By looking specifically at pornography preferences, we can see how women are balancing their sexts against the pornography they have consumed or have been exposed to by designing the kind of sexual media they would like to see and use (Karaian, 2012).

We view our participants as firmly establishing a line between the content of commercial pornography and that of sexting by actively producing representations of sexuality as distinct from the images they see in mainstream porn. This supports Amundsen's (2019) finding that women make sense of sexting by juxtaposing it with pornography in ordinary language. However, Amundsen (2019) argues that women equate the content of sexted images with mainstream pornography, whereas we have found that the concrete sexted images produced are deemed highly distinctive. The women here never doubted whether an image was pornographic or a sext, which certainty matters because it positioned the women in an agentic role. Indeed, they produced sexted images to specifically portray the kinds of images they personally deemed sexy and attractive. This means that "pornonormativity" (Bell, 2006, p. 400, see also Slater, 1998) might well set overall conventions, but

women also seek out more unconventional porn as well as other types of erotic imagery and are influenced by these in their own sexting practices. Reinforcing this point, some of the participants emphasised feminist viewpoints that critiqued mainstream pornography as being male-focused and exploitative, which they sought, through the production of their own sexts, to actively counter.

***Context: everydayness and reciprocity***

I mean, I am taking that image, you might say. So it's different angles [from porn] and I think it's like... a different light or it's more honest or something. Also because it's private. So like, it has a different setting, is what we might call it. (Lise)

In this quotation, Lise describes the difference between pornography and sexting, not only in terms of what the image looks like but also its authenticity, as it is something "private", a different context from that in which pornography is produced (Amundsen, 2019). Such contextualisation suggests that sexting is considered more personal as well as being ephemeral in comparison to the stability of pornographic materials (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017). While sexting happens in the moment, Anne argued that porn is "taped a while ago and then it might not be so real like in reality". She developed this point as follows:

I think porn is professional. I mean it's a photographer standing there taking your image or [...] Where you have the right lighting and images are edited and stuff like that. That's what I call porn. But intimate images, that's just where you are at home in bed or in your bedroom or something, where you do ordinary things, where you don't edit your images like that, where you might just have a Snapchat filter, where you might make it black and white or something, right? Ehm. But I wouldn't say, I think porn is professional. And the other is just cosy. (Anne)

Here Anne connects porn to the professionalism of the photographer and a clear focus on achieving the best possible result by using lighting and editing. This evokes a 'male gaze' on the female body as an object (Mulvey, 1989). Conversely, intimate images are connected with being in the home, the ordinary and everyday, which feels comfortable and familiar. She also centres the image on a representation of her own sexual self, compared to the outside view of the pornographer. Once again, we see how both the content and the context of sexting are juxtaposed with pornography, both by Lise who does not use porn and Anne who does so frequently.

Ida explained that pornography is used for masturbation and "relief", whereas sexting is the practice of "sharing intimacy, where if you watch a porno, then you don't share anything intimate with those in that movie. On the other hand, when you receive that image, it's like 'from me to you'. It's between us". The reciprocity involved in sexting stimulated Olga to refer to it as a form of "tailored pornography", where the two partners are each

working to give the other exactly the kind of pleasure they are seeking. For Olga, sexting is a tool that connects two people who are both letting each other's desires guide what they send. In tailored porn, both the sender and the receiver are each other's 'customers' and they 'pay' with images and compliments, which makes the other party feel desired and attractive. The focus placed by our participants on customising sexual images to highlight emotions and forms of attachment resonates with the emphasis in newer porn studies that women prefer porn and erotica that emphasise intimacy. Indeed, women have been shown to be less attracted to porn that does not showcase how the actors are turned on by each other (Ashton et al., 2018; Chadwick et al., 2018).

Wilson-Kovacs (2009) notes, "[w]omen expected and wanted empathy and understanding as a part of their intimate routines" (p. 153). This was a re-occurring theme in our interviews, too: the participants wanted and needed more than explicit portrayals of intercourse from sexual images and texts to be aroused. Some explicitly mentioned that they do not only want to see desirable bodies, but also to feel that their bodies are desirable. Therefore, some women viewed sexting as an easy way to satisfy their desire to be desired and to feel desired. This process of evaluating oneself in relation to other social actors' evaluations echoes Charlie Cooley's (1992) classic notion of the 'looking-glass self', where the self is created by adopting the gaze of the other (Franks & Gecas, 1992). Sexting is thus set within a context that is reciprocal. It is between two people: one expects to receive positive feedback and will continue to create images that aim to elicit desire and affirming reactions from the other. In this way, sexting is understood as pleasurable, inducing self-confidence and helping to create a positive view of one's own body and sexuality.

### ***Consent: coercion and control***

Having examined how women juxtapose sexting and pornography both in terms of the final product and the process of conceiving and sharing sexts, we finally turn to negotiations of consent within women's consumption, production and sharing of sexual images.

In our interviews, consent played a key role in the women's evaluations of sexual images. With regard to both porn and sexting, our participants judged images as sexy or not based on whether they were produced through consensual sexual acts. Our participants found nothing sexy about non-consensually shared images. A sexted image was only attractive to its intended recipient if it was consensually shared and kept within that interaction between just two people. As Ida stated, "I understand that it's hot if [an image] is sent to you, but if it's shared with everybody else, and it's not directed at you, then I don't see how that is hot". Similarly, pornographic images displaying the coercion of women were generally deemed unappealing and stimulated our participants to refer to concerns about the well-being of porn actresses. Even though some of our participants enjoyed pornographic narratives that played out scenarios of dominance, these scenes had to showcase the female actor's sexual pleasure. Others explained how pornography

was about enjoying things you would never admit to liking and thereby challenging your own boundaries, but these fantasies had to stay on the screen and should not be adopted in real-life sexual practices.

These ways of ensuring and decoding consent are congruent with studies of women's porn consumption, in which it has been found that women deem the viewing of coercive or abusive images threatening to their sexual enjoyment (Ashton et al., 2018). By fast-forwarding through the parts of mainstream porn that they find coercive, or by choosing niche genres (e.g. feminist or gay porn), women may seek to ensure that the sexual images they watch are framed as consensual and mutually beneficial (Chadwick et al., 2018). In our interviews, this focus on consent translated into the women underlining that they were highly conscious of how far they would let their inspiration from porn influence their sexting:

I don't think the images [are inspired by porn], but when writing comes into sexting, then definitely – there you know, if you had just seen something – I mean, I am not afraid to say outright that I watch porn; it's a lie when someone tells you they never watch it. So yeah, I watch porn, and I know very well that if I am sitting writing something dirty to some guy, I know that it is inspired from it being something I saw where I am like, 'He would so find this awesome'. And all that porn does come into the bedroom. It's that both guys and girls are more like, 'This is what it looks like in porn, so that's how it should be like. So I guess that's what we are doing'. I mean it has got wilder, I think in the bedrooms, than it was, because normally it's just like, that's what it should be. And it gets pushy sometimes, I think. (Mia)

Here Mia explains that pornography consumption can lead to pressure to have sex that is "wilder", before describing "pushy" sex as involving "awkward, strange positions", which can be "fun" but are ultimately less "intimate" and "personal". Thus, Mia quite precisely describes pornification from an everyday perspective: as porn becomes culturally mainstream, new sexual practices become part of the bedroom repertoire. However, what Mia is underlining is that she counters the pushiness of pornification and only allows pornographic fantasies to venture into her writing within sexting, not into her offline sex life and certainly not into her sexted images. In addition, she suspects here that others might be less cautious and critiques her peers for being unreflective about the pornification of sex acts. Consequently, Mia dares to be inspired by porn, but she is also very careful about how she uses this inspiration, so that the imitation does not jeopardise intimacy in her sexual relations.

Mia's portrayal of herself as a cautious sexter, who picks and chooses how much to pornify her sexting, mirrors a larger tendency in our data, where the participants first and foremost explained that they needed to feel in control when sexting. When sexting, they did not want men to lead or push; rather, sexting gave them a feeling of having power over their partners. These women ensured that their partners respected their consent and did not accept that their sexts were saved or shared further. Cautious sexters would

therefore use apps to ensure that sexts were erased. This deliberate focus on consent was evident both among those who felt in control of sexting and those who were afraid of it or who had had negative experiences in the past. This type of risk management has been widely described in the sexting literature (e.g. Renfrow & Rollo, 2014) but has rarely been used to examine how women are actively picking and choosing between different influences from porn in order to control their sexting (Amundsen, 2019).

Our research suggests that women do not feel pornified when they sext, as they make clear distinctions between these two kinds of sexual images. We see that women engage critically with pornography and tailor – rather than act out – what they (like to) see in porn via their sexting practices. From our data it appears that young women are able to resist and negotiate the pornification of culture in various ways.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined how women's different experiences with pornography play a role in how they negotiate content, context and consent in sexting. We have discussed how women engage with porn in multiple ways, criticising it as well as enjoying it. Although the women in our study related to porn in different ways, they all sexted and they all demonstrated how sexting and porn should not be conflated. Rather than imitating porn, the women used sexting to produce sexual images that contained components they felt porn was lacking, namely authenticity, subtlety and reciprocity. The images they produced in their texts 'solved' some of their criticisms of porn and allowed them to feel good about their own bodies, rather than representing a direct means of achieving sexual satisfaction. As regards both sexting and porn, the women remained aware and alert to risks of coercion and, while porn could be used to fantasise about transgressive sexual practices, the participants sought to stay in control when sexting.

This study has proffered content, context and consent as three parameters used by the participants to structure their sexting practices, which were understood in opposition to mainstream pornography. Our findings support the argument that sexting is a media practice that should be interpreted as produced in relation to other available resources and representations. Admittedly, our study is limited by its sole focus on pornography, while failing to take into account other types of visual media with which young people engage (e.g. advertising, films, music videos, Instagram and other social media platforms). However, we are confident that future research can use the "three c's" framework to relate sexting to the consumption of and critical engagement with different online and offline media.

Our focus on porn has allowed us to directly contribute to the arguments found in previous scholarship and public debate about pornography as either empowering or harmful for women (Sullivan & McKee, 2015). All too often we find that anti-pornography



arguments are primarily concerned with men's use of porn, not least the suggestion that pornography may lead men to abuse women through online or offline means:

Note the site owned and operated by the Pornhub Network titled *I Own You Bitch*, which features hundreds of gonzos riddled with men treating women as their sexual property. Does watching such videos influence men to engage in image-based sexual abuse? This is an empirical question that can only be answered empirically, but, again, there are studies showing that men's consumption of Internet pornography in general is related to various types of woman abuse. (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016, p. 5)

Empirical material causally linking pornography to image-based sexual violence is still missing (McNair, 2014), but so is literature considering how women view, use and critique porn sites. Here we have examined the role of pornography in women's lives by asking them directly how they use it and what they specifically like and dislike about different types of porn. Our analysis has shown that women are very articulate about the porn they watch and detail how they integrate these experiences into their everyday digital sexuality.

An obvious limitation is that our analysis is based on a relatively small sample of heterosexual, young adult Danish women. Denmark was the first country in the world to legalise pornography and Copenhagen has been sociologically described as a sexually liberal city (Bech, 1998). We propose that other scholars examine how our findings may differ for women in countries outside Europe, for particular ethnic groups, for heterosexual men, or for people attracted to members of the same sex. Either way, our position is that it is critical for the field of sexting research to acknowledge that pornification is not an abstract affective and visual feature infusing young people's lives, but rather that porn films constitute concrete and diverse material, which is both engaged with and critiqued in sexting practices.

We have developed here the concept of 'tailored pornography', a term coined by one of our participants (Olga) to capture how women deliberately work with sexual images that suit their porn preferences. We argue that women's user experiences – of browsing through, recoiling from and being aroused by porn – are important aspects of understanding women's active engagement with the pornification of culture and how it is (not) allowed to seep into their sexting practices. Incorporating women's pornography tastes and preferences in sexting research is an important part of integrating women's narrated experiences into heated and often political debates around porn, sexting, female sexuality and image-based sexual abuse.

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