Researching Young People's Sexualized Digital Practices Involving Imagery: A Transmethodological Approach

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Abstract

Young people constitute and negotiate their gendered identities and belonging, as well as their romantic and erotic relationships, through sexualized digital practices involving imagery. Most of these practices are unproblematic, but sometimes they take forms that are more abusive and lead to (particularly) girls being visually exposed online. Such practices are commonly referred to as sexting or revenge pornography and have been subject to much discussion in research, in the media and among practitioners. These discussions, however, sometimes fail to acknowledge the diversity, volatility and ambiguity of the practices. This article discusses whether the approaches used in research on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery are sufficiently refined and sensitive in order to grasp the comprehensive complexity and messy constitutions of such practices. Based on analyses of the studies' conceptualizations, perspectives and methods, I suggest that future research production might benefit from a more transgressive and flexible approach that learns from the full array of approaches in the

previous studies and takes the instability and multiplicity of young people's practices into account. Such an approach should entail an openness towards ambiguous conceptualizations, a more processual perspective that includes both individual, social and technological aspects and the use of multiple explorative methods across on- and offline spaces.

Keywords: youth, sexting, image-based abuse, digital media, transmethodology

Introduction

Young people constitute and negotiate their gendered identities and belonging, as well as their romantic and erotic relationships, through sexualized digital practices involving imagery[1] (Rasmussen & Søndergaard, 2020; Søndergaard, 2019). Most of these practices are unproblematic, but sometimes they take forms that are more abusive and lead to (particularly) girls being visually exposed online. Such practices are commonly referred to as sexting or revenge pornography and have been subject to much discussion in research, in the media and among practitioners. These discussions, however, often fail to acknowledge the diversity, volatility and ambiguity of practices that can take many forms beyond the straightforward sending, receiving and forwarding of imagery, e.g. showing someone an image on one's phone but without sending it, or commenting upon images put online by someone else. Moreover, the journey and interpretation of the imagery may significantly change the character and meaning of a practice. A practice may evolve from being consensual to non-consensual, or the imagery may come to matter in a new way, depending on the context of the platform where it is posted. The technological possibilities and conditions may further destabilize these kinds of practices. Imagery can be watched on a cracked screen, blurring the person portrayed, or digital editing software can be used

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1 Throughout the article, the term 'sexualized digital practices involving imagery' is used to cover both the production and spread of sexualized imagery, as well as more hybrid and complex sexualized digital practices involving imagery.

to cut apart and reassemble imagery in new and different forms, resulting in the emergence of new concepts, e.g. 'deep fakes'[2] (a fake image that appears real, such as a composite of one person's naked body and another person's face). The practices are thus formed by entanglements of both individual, social and technological aspects, but the question is whether the conceptualizations, perspectives and methodological approaches used in research are sufficiently refined and sensitive to produce analyses that increase our understanding of such volatile phenomena?

In this article, I discuss the conceptualizations, perspectives and methods used in research on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery. The research I discuss is rooted in different disciplines and represents different theoretical and/or methodological traditions. It is therefore also related to societal understandings and practices in different ways. My interest in transmethodology is centered on the possibility of a research approach that is open to learn from the full array of approaches in the existing literature and that attends to – and incorporates – transgressive and emergent conceptualizations, perspectives and methods as a research strategy for accessing these highly complex and comprehensive practices among young people. Such an approach takes the instability of the practices into account by rethinking the field as a form of network – not necessarily bound together in localities, but by data points that intertwine through ongoing and unpredictable movements (Burrell, 2009; Markham & Gammelby, 2018; Pink, 2015). This requires an openness towards situated and ambiguous conceptualizations, processual and flexible perspectives of the practices that includes both individual, social and technological aspects and the use of multiple explorative methods, both online and offline. I gradually develop these arguments throughout the article, providing a summary in the conclusion.

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2 For a discussion of this phenomenon, see for example Maras and Alexandrou (2019) or Fletcher (2018).

I begin the article by briefly outlining my approach to the research I discuss. I then introduce a Danish case (popularly referred to as the 'Umbrella Case') where more than 1000 young people were charged with child pornography offences after sharing a video of two 15-year-olds having rough sex while being recorded by a group of male peers. I do not intend to offer an exhaustive analysis of the case, but I use it to support and challenge the arguments I develop in the text. I then turn my attention to the research literature on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery and discuss the challenges of conceptualizing the complexity of such practices. Then follows a discussion of the perspectives offered by those producing knowledge on the topic and of the methods they use to approach the field. I am particularly interested in the ways these different conceptualizations, perspectives and methodological approaches direct our attention to certain aspects of the practices, while overlooking others. I end the article by discussing how future research may benefit from a more transmethodological approach in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery.

Approach and researcher positioning

The article is inspired by new materialist thinking, primarily in the form of agential realism as formulated by Karen Barad (2007). In Barad's thinking, multiple phenomena and their entanglements are considered agential forces, constituting the world in its process of ongoing becoming. Phenomena are thus not individual entities but ontologically, indeterminate and entangled material agencies. For Barad, this entanglement implies transgressions of existing distinctions and boundaries between phenomena in the world (Barad, 2008). As such, her thinking is strongly aligned with the transmethodological ambition pursued throughout this article, and it is from her thinking

that my interest in complexity has emerged. This theoretical perspective implies a positioning of the researcher as a situated subject, involved and invested in the production of knowledge (Haraway, 1988) – a far cry from representational science's positioning of the ideal researcher as distant, objective and neutral.

In pursuing the transgressive ambition, I have further been inspired by Ringrose and Niccolini (2020), who advice researchers to blur traditional boundaries between research, theory, politics and community engagement. When I explored the research literature on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, I thus engaged with a range of different, yet entangled, disciplines, e.g. criminology, law, psychology, media and communication studies. Each discipline emphasizes different aspects of young people's practices, but the knowledge produced also travels across disciplinary fields and entangles with practice. Plauborg (2019) emphasizes that research and knowledge production does not occur in isolation, but it entangles with other agential phenomena in the world and is contentiously reconfigured in new ways. When searching for literature, I was thus helped by knowledge from my professional experiences of working with young people and their social-digital issues. This knowledge – about the character of the practices, their processes and technological entanglements – qualified my search strategies and enabled me to pursue some of the volatile conceptualizations and entangled interdisciplinary discussions of a broad range of sexualized digital practices involving imagery among young people. Additionally, it increased my context-sensitive judgment (Hammersley, 2001) and allowed me to include not only studies concerned with well-defined and easily recognizable practices, but also those examining hybrid and complex practices that are yet undefined, and thereby – in line with the words of MacLure (2005) – to avoid only including simplified versions of scholarship.

To search for literature from various disciplines I used the databases *ProQuest* and *Scopus*. I identified relevant terms and keywords, aware that the list of search terms would grow as I explored their entanglements through my continued searching, reading and tracking down of pertinent references in the articles I found. The search terms included *sexting, revenge porn, sex bullying, sharing of nudes* and *child pornography.* The list expanded to also include *non-consensual pornography, involuntary pornography, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, violence, coercion, dickpic, sexploitation, intimacy* and variations of these terms. In order to increase the relevance of the search results, I combined the terms with keywords related to digital media, e.g. *digital, virtual, online, electronic, cyber, technology, selfie, image, picture, photo, video* and *media.*

These searches resulted in both empirical studies, analyses of policies and educational materials, discussions of law constructions, literature reviews providing generalized knowledge claims and conclusions on behalf of many studies, as well as theoretical discussions that present different forms of knowledge. The intention was not to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature and I may disappoint some readers, who might have wished such an overview. Rather, the intention was to discuss the research field and the entanglement it is made of. Thus, I did not include every study potentially relevant to the topic of my discussion nor did I adhere to formalized standards in line with those known from the genre of traditional literature reviews. Instead, I aimed to include a broad and diverse range of studies drawn from different disciplines in order to explore whether their research approach was able to grasp the obvious complexity of the field. In this way, I also adopt a transgressive approach in the format of this paper, which dissolves genres and disturbs the taken-for-granted scripts of scientific articles.

The Umbrella Case

Before turning to the research concerned with young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, I present a Danish case about non-consensual production and spreading of imagery, which attracted a lot of media attention and caused concern among the police, politicians, parents, teachers and young people themselves.

In 2016, a video of a 15-year-old Danish girl having rough sex with a boy was recorded and distributed online by a group of male peers observing the two[3]. The video circulated online via YouTube, Facebook Messenger, SMS and other digital and social media (Buch, 2016). Two years later, in January 2018, more than a thousand young people in Denmark, aged 15 and up, were charged with distributing child pornography after sharing the video. The content, scale and severity of the Umbrella Case took everybody by surprise and left society in what Hasinoff (2015) describes as a 'sexting panic'. The girl in the video was shamed by some people while receiving sympathy from others. The sharers (mostly referred to as boys, although approx. 20% of the charged persons were girls) were demonized as teachers, parents, politicians and the police expressed their shock and concern regarding young people's harmful and harassing image-sharing practices, demanding that those responsible be punished.

One may ask the question of how this all came to pass – the girl, the boys, sharers, bystanders, parents and the authorities all told and still tell different stories as to the motivations, intentions and circumstances surrounding the production and spreading of the explicit imagery. Some maintain that there was a willful intent to harass the girl. Meanwhile, others have claimed that those sharing the video might not have had such malicious intentions, but were merely engaging in what they most likely regarded as a

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3 The young men were charged with rape and distribution of child pornography, but the court only found them guilty of the latter charge.

somewhat normal part of digital-analogue youth culture, including gendered negotiations, demarcations and issues that are seemingly no longer bound to the analogue world. Thus, a number of those charged protested in media outlets about what they considered the injustice of the charges, stating that they did not even remember sharing the video, as the sharing of sexualized digital content is an everyday part of mundane digital interactions among young people.

Nevertheless, all concerned found themselves in an unexpected situation for which they were ill-prepared. The desire to resist and reject such practices by making an example of the young people involved was strong, which led to the large number of young people being charged, with potential consequences for their lives for many years to come. Obviously, such a response is understandable, but it primarily focuses on the actions of individuals while disregarding many of the social and technological aspects also contributing to the enactment of the practices. One such aspect is the responsibility of the social media platforms used to share the video and their apparent unwillingness to take any form of action to delete the video and halt its spread despite repeated requests from the girl[4].

Conceptual Challenges

The lack of knowledge regarding the complexity of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery is also noticeable in the research on the topic. Approaching the diversity, volatility and entanglements of the practices, however, seems to entail some conceptual difficulties and challenges, which I discuss in this section. I begin with some of the quantitative studies, as their ambitions to grasp and estimate the prevalence of these complex practices have been particularly challenged. Along the way, I

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[4] In November 2019, a network of researchers, police authorities and stakeholders, established in 2017 by a lawyer who represented many cases of young women being digitally abused, proposed a new Danish law holding social media platforms responsible if they do not take action in cases like the Umbrella Case.

include the qualitative studies and discuss the entanglements and abilities of the conceptualizations used in this part of the research.

Measurements of complex and volatile practices

The pervasiveness of sexualized digital practices involving imagery among young people has been established by numerous quantitative studies. An Australian survey conducted among 2000 teenagers shows for example that the majority of 13-18-year-olds have engaged in a form of sexualized digital practice involving imagery (Lee et al., 2015). Almost half reported that they had sent a sexual image or video of themselves to someone else, and approximately two-thirds reported having received a sexual image. Thinking of the Umbrella Case in the light of these results, the young people's claim regarding the mundaneness of sharing sexual imagery online is clearly not unique to Denmark. The quantitative studies in the field, however, show quite different results. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 39 studies on multiple forms of sexting behavior among under-18s found, for example, that the mean prevalence rates for sending and receiving sexts[5] were 14.8% and 27.4%, respectively. Moreover, the prevalence rate for forwarding sexts without consent was found to be 12% (Madigan et al., 2018). This latter figure corresponds with the number of *boys* stating that they had forwarded sexts without consent in a Danish study of young people aged 16-20 (Dahl et al., 2018). However, for the *girls* in this study, the figure was just 2%. It is further interesting to note that 31% of the boys and 14% of the girls in the same Danish study reported having received a sexual image without the knowledge or consent of the person portrayed (Dahl et al., 2018).

These kinds of studies provide invaluable knowledge for estimating the prevalence of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery. But the variations of the

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5 The word 'sext' describes a sexual message or image showing naked people or sexual acts that somebody sends using a cellphone. As discussed later in this article, 'sexting' is used in a number of quite different ways in the research literature.

results are compelling and may reflect some of the difficulties in conceptualizing the extensive complexity and diversity of the field (Drouin et al., 2013). Fairclough (2001) emphasizes that 'wording' is never an innocent endeavor, but it summon different realities. In other words, the concepts and terminologies used to conduct this research shape the interpretive gaze of the practices and of how they occur; the chronicles of the events, the positioning of those involved, the understandings of relationships or community and the involvements of the technology. So how are these diverse and volatile practices then conceptualized throughout the research literature, and how does that shape perspectives of and approaches to young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery?

Conceptualizations shaping the research gaze

The majority of the quantitative studies concerned with young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery differentiates between consensual and non-consensual practices. According to Henry and Flynn (2019), even this quite general distinction is not a clear-cut, as the circumstances surrounding some practices (e.g. when imagery is spread on an online image board) might be difficult to determine. Some of the quantitative studies use terminology that are more specific or ask about particular behaviors in order to identify the practices and estimate their prevalence. The same definitions, however, seem to be used for different practices – a definitional dilemma also encountered in relation to other social matters (Hansen, 2011). The frequently used term 'sexting', for example, is often used as a catch-all term that does not make specific differentiations of the practices but is used to cover all sorts of consensual and non-consensual practices where sexualized content is produced and spread among individuals using digital technology (Ngo et al., 2017; Powell & Henry, 2014; Wood et al., 2015). A study by Houck et al. (2014), for

example, uses the term sexting to cover both texts with sexual content and sexual images, whereas a study conducted by Van Ouytsel et al. (2014) only includes the sharing of sexual images in its definition of sexting. According to Powell and Henry (2014), broad terms help researchers (and others) avoid simplistic understandings of how imagery was produced and spread, but they also open up for all sorts of interpretations of the circumstances – and in research sometimes leave it unclear what is actually being examined.

Meanwhile, the use of more specific terms is not without difficulties either. Specific terms often entail certain motives or circumstances, describing how the practices emerged and how the imagery was distributed. McGlynn and Rackley (2017), for example, have identified how the term 'revenge pornography' is used in both popular and academic discourses to denote various non-consensual image-sharing practices – including situations where the origin of the imagery was not a romantic relationship and the motive for dissemination was not revenge. Despite this, the term revenge pornography still implies an understanding of how the situation happened: imagery distributed as an act of revenge, most often by a jilted lover. Based on their research among adults, Henry and Powell (2015), instead suggest terming such practices as 'technology-facilitated sexual violence' or, in their later work, as 'image-based abuse' (Powell et al., 2017). In alignment with situations where young people's production and spreading of imagery are defined as child pornography, such terms produce specific positions of active subjects (the perpetrators) and passive subjects (the victims). Whether in research or in practice, e.g. in legal responses in the Umbrella Case, such understandings tend to focus on individuals in what appears to be a clearly demarcated and defined situation.

Lee et al. (2015) instead mention the term 'sexting that goes wrong', and draw attention to the varying circumstances under which non-consensual image-sharing can take place among young people. Unlike more individual-centered approaches, this term transgresses specific understandings of the chronicles of the event and implies a more neutral positioning of all involved parties. As such, it acknowledges non-consensual image-sharing as part of a digitally mediated youth culture, influenced and enabled by multiple aspects, where choices are not necessarily intentional, meaning that image-sharing might occur for no specific reason and with no specific motive. A similar line of thought is also found among researchers approaching the production and spreading of imagery as social and cultural forms of bullying (see for example: Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). In a study of young people's non-consensual sharing of imagery, Ringrose and Rawlings (2015) refer to such practices as gendered bullying, but in alignment with Schott and Søndergaard (2014), they reject the traditional understanding of bullying and its binary positions of 'bully' and 'victim'. Instead, they emphasize how young people's practices are constituted by multiple important phenomena, including the technological conditions. Other researchers have taken similar approaches but placed greater emphasis on the technological aspects by using the terms 'cyberbullying' or 'online bullying' (Coburn et al., 2015; Shaheen, 2014).

These ways of understanding and approaching young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery help reduce demonization of those who have re-shared the image. Instead, they acknowledge that such practices are part of young people's everyday lives and their ongoing subjective and social becoming across online and offline spaces. Moreover, such understandings and approaches can somewhat quell the moral panic among adults. At the same time, they, however, also risk diminishing the damage

experienced by victims of non-consensual sexualized image-sharing practices (Dodge, 2016) and fail to acknowledge more organized practices found on some online image-boards and distribution channels (Henry & Flynn, 2019). Unlike more individualistic understandings, these approaches, however, often include social and technological aspects of young people's practices in their studies and thereby develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complex forces at work when sexualized imagery circulates.

As helpful as all of these terminologies are in conceptualizing the field, the urge to classify and categorize risks over-simplification and nurtures a false sense of stability of practices characterized by constant change, hybridity, complexity and that poorly fit specific terms. A few researchers have already challenged the existing conceptualizations and the understandings of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery they entail. Ringrose et al. (2012), for example, argue that the distinction between sexting among consenting parties and sexting involving coercion is not straightforward. And Henry and Powell (2016) suggest that the line between the sexual and the non-sexual is not always clear. Yet, there is a lack of suitable terminology to describe such transgressive practices, which may result in lack of attention to these kinds of practices in research in favor of the more easily recognizable practices. Researchers generally tend to disentangle complexity and omit experiences of mess, ambivalence, elusiveness and multiplicity, when describing a given field, Hine et al. (2009) argue. This, however, may, lead to straightforward, linear narratives of practices, which are rarely as simplistic and fixated as presented.

Research perspectives

Looking across all of the conceptualizations, it becomes interesting to also attend to the research perspectives that these conceptualizations contribute to enact. In the

following, I therefore discuss the perspectives taken up in the existing research on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, particularly what the studies help us understand and how they deal with the complexity of the practices, they study.

Engagement in risky behavior

Several researchers emphasize that the scholarly attention given to young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery has been infused with panic (Albury, 2017; Angelides, 2013; Salter et al., 2013), similar to some of the responses in the Umbrella Case. Starr and Lavis (2018) argue that this has led to an intense focus on the risk of harassment that girls face when they participate in sexualized digital practices. According to both Albury and Crawford (2012) and Hasinoff (2013), this has resulted in educational campaigns and interventions with the intention of *discouraging* young people from engaging in sexting – even if entirely consensual – by depicting all the things that could go wrong. Bond (2011) refers to this as a 'risk discourse', and it seems to have strongly influenced the research field, leading to numerous investigations of online risks and precautions (see for example: Frankel et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2014; Ahern and Mechling, 2013).

The understanding of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery as risky is, of course, informed by good intentions and desires to keep children and young people safe when they engage with digital media. These perspectives offer relevant knowledge about young people's individual behavior, motivations and actions, e.g. the correlation between sexting and other risk behaviors (e.g. alcohol use) (Frankel et al., 2018) or the importance of individual coping strategies in relation to sexting (Smith et al., 2014). However, transferring such individualized research perspectives to societal responses may lead to somewhat binary divisions between right and wrong behavior,

victims and perpetrators and a focus on punishing individuals, as it was done in the Umbrella Case. This may be helpful for some young people, but an individualized and risk-focused perspective may also ignore the important social and technological aspects and result in even greater secrecy of the practices that increases the difficulties of monitoring and investigating the behavior. This has, for example, been the case with other risky and norm-breaking behaviors, e.g. the formation of online communities promoting eating disorders (see for example: Brotsky and Giles, 2007; Gailey, 2009).

Distribution of child pornography

The overwhelming focus on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery as engagement in risky behavior is particularly influenced by the laws, governing such matters. In most countries around the world, sexualized imagery of children and young people under 18 is characterized as child pornography – but in some places, even imagery produced by the children and young people themselves may risk such a categorization. Among others, Hasinoff (2015) discusses the potential issues resulting from such a law and emphasizes that children and young people potentially face charges of distributing child pornography for taking and sharing sexualized imagery of themselves, despite such practices being far from traditional understandings of child pornography (see also: Karaian, 2015; Lee, Crofts, Salter, Milivojevic, & McGovern, 2013). Barr (2016) is also critical of this construction of the law and coins the term 'child autopornography', while pointing out that a law created to protect children ends up harming them if they themselves are charged with child pornography offences. Likewise, Crofts and Lee (2013) argue that such kinds of laws have the potential to cause more harm than many of the practices they seek to regulate.

Such discussions are, however, rare in Denmark. Under Danish law, an exception allows young people aged 15-18 to share sexualized imagery with each other with the consent of all concerned. However, as with the Umbrella Case, such imagery will be categorized as child pornography if it is shared with others without consent. Both Sweeny (2011) and Albury (2016) argue in favor of laws similar to those in Denmark in order to acknowledge the social and relational aspects of young people's sharing of sexualized imagery with friends or as part of their romantic relationships. These scholars find it inconsistent that young people over the age of 15 are allowed to have sex and 'share' their physical body with someone, while not being allowed to share their 'digital' body.

While these discussions involve highly charged political agendas and may seem distant from empirical research, the risk-focused and individualized understandings and conceptualizations of the field transfer into other parts of the research and the society. The discussions draw, for example, attention to how the law, in some ways, has been unable to keep up with the rapid technological development and the evolving use of technologies. Moreover, the discussions are associated with child pornography, which incite both public shock, fear, repulsion and an urge to punish and prohibit young people's practices – as it happened in the Umbrella Case – instead of working with and researching the complex social, digital and normative issues that enable these sometimes abusive practices.

Normative gender discourse and social negotiations

A part of the research has, however, been concerned with the normative gender discourses and social negotiations of young people's engagement in sexualized digital practices involving imagery. Some have, for example, studied the norms and gendered positioning represented in public awareness and prevention campaigns – many of them arising from the public panic and risk discourse (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Hasinoff,

2017; Salter et al., 2013). Salter et al. (2013) point out that gendered norms of sexting are often left unchallenged in these public debates and campaigns, which end up individualizing the problem to the girl, who initially sent the image, if the image is published online. This tendency, however, is more wide-spread and Henry and Powell (2015) stress that situations of non-consensual image-sharing generally are framed as matters of the depicted girls' naiveté. These framings were also present in the responses to the Umbrella Case, with some commentators arguing that the girl should not have engaged in sexual activities with the boys at all, and others stating that she must have known that they were filming her and should have done something to prevent it. Boys are, however, rarely subjected to the same judgments – a dynamic often referred to as 'double-standards' (Karaian, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2013; Salter, 2016).

Such analyses have the potential to identify and address the influence of some of the overarching and subjugating normative forces and their abilities to shape moral understandings of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery. Other studies, however, also show how issues of gender inequality influence the interactions among young people. Salter (2016) studies for example how young people interpret the bodies depicted in the imagery, they share. He emphasizes that naked female bodies are conflated with pornography, while the exposed male body can serve a range of purposes, e.g. showing off athletic prowess or functioning as a joke that is easily dismissed (see also Albury (2015) for a similar point). Furthermore, other studies show how imagery of girls become valuable capital to be exchanged among male peers as they negotiate gendered hierarchies and attempt to maintain social bonds and obtain masculine recognition (Harder, 2020; Harvey & Ringrose, 2015; Hunehäll & Odenbring, 2020; Johansen et al., 2018).

All of these studies increase our understanding of the impact of gender and gender norms in young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, and they help explain why imagery of female bodies travels faster through space and time than imagery of male bodies. Moreover, they help us understand, why the girl recorded in the Umbrella Case was – and is – shamed by peers and in the media to a far greater extent than the boy who first shared the video. The analyses, could, however, be strengthened by also considering how these practices are influenced by the technological contexts, circumstances and conditions.

Digitally mediated practices

Research focused on the technological aspects of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery often discusses how the digitally mediated possibilities for constructing identity, relationships and belonging in youth communities contribute to the enactment of the practices. One strand of research focuses on the way the technology facilitates these practices. Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015) study, for example, the sharing of 'sexy selfies' on one's own social media profile and emphasize how the technology enables new forms of self-expression. Other studies, summarized in a review conducted by Cooper et al. (2016), are more focused on the ways the technological contexts can facilitate inter-relational sexting practices. They emphasize, for example, that the meanings and intentions of inter-relational sharing of images are remarkably varied, depending on the (technological) context and can occur as part of flirting and/or gaining romantic attention, as an experimental adolescent phase, or in response to pressure from a partner or friends.

Such studies provide interesting insights about the different ways young people make sense of and use the current technological possibilities in relation to their sexualized

digital practices involving imagery. They, however, show limited interest in the ways the technological conditions, affordances and invitations influence young people's practices. Some of the young people in the Umbrella Case stated, for example, that they were not able to determine the age of the girl depicted in the video as it had been shared multiple times and thus was displayed in poor quality; in some cases the footage may even have been viewed on a phone with a heavily cracked screen.

Yet, in other parts of the research, the active role of the technology is emphasized as utterly important in order to understand these kinds of practices among young people. Kofoed and Larsen (2016), for example, study young people's sharing of imagery in exposed situations, e.g. sexualized material or 'ugly selfies', using the social media app Snapchat. They argue that the ephemerality of Snapchat messages, as an inherent property of the technology, is a crucial contributing factor in the acceleration of these practices as knowing pictures will disappear after a given period of time creates a certain intimacy in the relationship (for a similar analysis, see: Handyside & Ringrose, 2017). However, this intimacy can be abruptly broken when young people realize that someone has taken a screenshot of their picture and could potentially share it with others. Renold and Ringrose (2016) furthermore engage with the technological conditions, when they analyze young people's entanglements with the bio-technological landscape of sexualized image creation. They emphasize that the technology enables new formations of 'the body', as imagery of isolated body parts are able to float around online for people to tag their friends in – even though the imagery may not be portraying the tagged persons.

These ways of assigning the technological conditions a more active role result in perspectives on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery that on the one hand grasp another level of complexity embedded in such practices. These kinds of

studies, however, may be inadequate if the aim of the knowledge production is a clear explanation of clearly defined and recognizable practices that effortlessly can be transformed into interventions. Nevertheless, a more transgressive approach that aims to include both the individual, social and technological aspects and their entanglements in the analyses has the potential to provide nuanced knowledge about the diversity, volatility and ambiguity of these practices among young people.

Methodological approaches

All these points, dilemmas and challenges lead to new questions of how to methodologically approach the entangled phenomena involved in the enactment of young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery. In the following, I turn to the methods used in the existing empirical studies and discuss which kinds of knowledge they contribute to produce. I pay particular attention to some of the studies that apply refined and context-sensitive methods in order to demonstrate their potential to address the complex issues of young people's practices.

Among the most frequently used methods when investigating young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery are quantitative survey-based methods (see for example: Dake et al., 2012; Drouin et al.; 2013; Strassberg et al., 2014; Strassberg et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2015). Such methodological approaches have many advantages, e.g. the ability to provide data for estimating the prevalence of a certain behavior, as well as to give a broad insight into multiple kinds of behavior. However, as mentioned earlier, there are challenges in the field that are difficult to gauge using such methods. The inconsistent use of conceptualizations and terminologies in surveys makes it difficult to compare data as well as to determine whether the studies concern the same phenomena. Pre-specified questions can resolve this, yet research still risks reducing the complexity of

the practices in a number of ways. Responses to ostensibly similar questions about the spreading of imagery can vary considerably depending on the wording of the questions, for example whether the practices are described as *sharing, stealing, exchanging, circulating, distributing, spreading, showing* etc. – and pre-specified questions do not allow for such differentiations. Moreover, survey-based methods risk reducing complexity through the types of questions being asked. It is obviously impossible to address behavior that is unfamiliar to the researcher why the attention in surveys often concern 'known' practices, such as sexting or revenge pornography. Moreover, the practices, cases and examples that are yet unnamed, those that have evolved from other practices, or those that are too complex to be explained in one or two lines might be omitted. Although, these issues appear to only concern research, such approaches entangle with understandings among those who have to deal with and respond to the issues in practice, e.g. those involved in the Umbrella Case in a professional capacity.

A few studies complement surveys with qualitative methods through a mixed-methods approach (see for example: McGovern et al., 2016; Yeung et al., 2014). They supplement quantitative data with more detailed personal experiences of young people, for example conducted through interviews or focus groups. Such an approach has the potential to explore and recognize influential and instable forces beyond the individual, e.g. discourses, norms, gender, guilt, blame, culture and technological conditions and possibilities. Studies that not only acknowledge the influence of social and technological forces, but also engage with their agency and their entanglements, however, seem to inform even more refined and nuanced perspectives on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery.

The potentials of context-sensitive methods

To study the complexity of digital life, requires, according to Markham (2013b), methodological adaptation and innovation. Looking into the research on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, those of the studies that are carried out in alignment with this suggestion and use context-sensitive and refined methodological approaches often result in very interesting analyses. Ringrose and Barajas (2011), study for example teenage girls' digitized sexual identities on social network sites through observations of the girls' online profiles combined with interviews with them about the content of their profiles. This study finds that behavior – which from an outsider perspective looks like risky sexual behavior, where girls self-identify as sluts – also can be understood as part of a process of identity negotiation among peers, often meant as a joke or as a way of signaling that one does not care about being called such nicknames (for a similar approach, see also: Ringrose et al., 2012).

Another example is the aforementioned study of intimacy on Snapchat, conducted by Kofoed and Larsen (2016), who use a multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) and internet-mediated mixed-methods approach (Hansen et al., 2014; Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013; Larsen, 2014). This approach enables them to engage with the technology and apprehend some of the technological agency in the young people's practices. In alignment with the argument in this article, they also argue that there is yet a need for further development of methodologies that are able to monitor the moving and traveling practices of young people – both online and offline.

A third example is another aforementioned study, by Renold and Ringrose (2016), where they analyze the use of the 'tagging' function on Facebook in young people's sexualized digital practices. They emphasize how this function enables people to connect

random and potentially sexualized imagery to someone's Facebook profile even though the imagery may not be portraying these persons. To produce this context-sensitive analysis, they used ethnographic methods by moving beyond publicly available data and 'friending' their participants through a researcher Facebook profile. Such an approach not only gives them access to more data, it also provides first-hand access to private interactions regarding the affordances of the technology and the way they entangle with human agency. Moreover, this approach enables them to include the involved imagery; something that is otherwise quite rare in studies of young people's production and spread of imagery, most likely due to the ethical considerations and implications.

Through their application of explorative and context-sensitive methods, these studies produce new and refined perspectives on young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery. They refrain from being rule-driven but rely on a more inductive methodological approach that enables them to explore some of the unpredictable entanglements of individual, social and technological forces involved in these practices among young people. In the following, I briefly discuss the implications this could have for future research in the field and argue that these tentative steps towards more explorative and context-sensitive methodologies may be refined and developed further through a transmethodological approach.

Implications for future research

Internet-related phenomena are messy and lack boundaries (Markham & Baym, 2009). The legal approach in the Umbrella Case was to drastically reduce this messiness and hold the young people responsible and sentence the guilty. Although it can certainly be argued that it is only reasonable that those involved be held responsible for their actions, the question remains as to how all this messiness should be dealt with when

conducting research that seeks to increase knowledge and understanding with regard to young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery.

The messiness of researching such practices involves endless choices and considerations regarding how to study images, comments, contexts, affects and movements in and out of online and offline spaces across various media and localities, breathing sexual potentials in some contexts but not in others. How can researchers study bodies in photos that might disappear – or have already disappeared – only to reappear at some future point, potentially reconfigured, connected to a new identity, merged with a new face or new body parts? As forces of the human and non-human, space and time, entangle and move in unpredictable and unknown ways, questions of how to demarcate the field, where to begin and end the study, which methods to use, which media to include and how to proceed in difficult situations are a constant presence (Markham & Baym, 2009). The uncertainty when investigating young people's everyday private, intimate and potentially illegal interactions across space and time – not necessarily knowing whether the 'people' online are humans or bots, young or old, male or female, different individuals or the same individual hiding behind multiple profiles – might feel overwhelming. Hine et al. (2009) suggest that such uncertainties are the main source of anxiety for contemporary researchers in a field concerned with digitally mediated spaces, and the lack of an arsenal of innovative methods to engage with this complexity can easily lead researchers to fall back on traditional methods poorly suited to the complexity of digital interactions (Markham, 2013a). Qualitative internet inquiry, Markham and Baym (2009) argue, requires a tolerance for chaos, ambiguity and inductive thinking. In order to understand and approach both individual, social and technological aspects – and their entanglements – in young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, the researcher might

need to transgress specific conceptualizations, perspectives and methods and instead take up a more experimental and context-sensitive transmethodological approach.

Markham and Gammelby (2018) propose the concept of 'flow' in research involving the digital as an epistemological stance covering both what is studied and how to move when studying it. They argue that the concept of flow helps people make sense of culture – meaning, materiality, time, space and bodies – as it moves across digital material, platforms, or cases, "shifting from moment to moment as we try to stop time to make sense of what happened even as it is no longer happening" (p. 454). This implies an openness towards processual and instable conceptualizations and perspectives of the phenomena being studied. Moreover, it implies the use of multiple methods and empirical material (Postill & Pink, 2012), e.g. interviews, focus groups, digital ethnography, fieldwork, observations, document analysis and documentation of the technological architecture, images, comments, likes and debates in multiple ways, as well as developing methods along the way and including data that are *not* just there (e.g. the absence of attention to an image on social media) (Markham & Gammelby, 2018).

Consequently, the field site takes the form of a network (Burrell, 2009), not bound together in localities, but in collections of 'things' that become intertwined (Pink, 2015). This way of thinking aligns with Barad's (2007; 2008) understanding of the world as enactments of emergent and entangled phenomena, and it enables explorations of phenomena in the world that transgress current, yet temporary, distinctions and boundaries. In line with this, Baym (2013) argues that the crucial activities and layers of meaning when engaging in research involving the internet are to be found in the invisible connections as they occur across platforms in a multiplicity of globally distributed and diffused networks and in time/space configurations that may be impossible to capture. It

would be interesting to explore which perspectives on young people's sexualized digital

practices involving imagery that would arise if research attended to the multiplicity of

phenomena and their entanglements enacting the practices and tried to make sense of their

ephemeral connections, instead of analyzing them as demarcated and fixed data points.

Concluding remarks

Which kinds of conceptualizations, perspectives and approaches can produce

adequate knowledge about young people's new and complex digitalized world and its

sexualized and gendered dimensions? The responses to this question not only affect

research; they affect current and future generations of young people, their everyday lives

and their possibilities of living respectable lives together, as research informs and affects

the ways these practices are understood, approached and dealt with in society. Based on a

discussion of the conceptualizations used, the perspectives offered and the methods

applied in contemporary research on young people's sexualized digital practices involving

imagery, this article sets out to recognize, refine and develop the scholarly discourse and

point the way towards potentially rewarding future directions for transgressive research in

this field.

Studying the complexities of young people's sexualized digital practices involving

imagery seems to generate some difficulties for contemporary research. A crucial

challenge is how to conceptualize the diversity, volatility and ambiguity of the practices.

Some studies make use of broad terms, e.g. sexting, which invite open interpretations of

the practices, the positioning of those involved and the chronicles of the events, they

entail. Broad terms may, however, also risk overlooking the specific differentiations

between practices, their character, meanings and matters that more specific terms could

have addressed. The conceptualizations are important because they contribute to shape the

decisions of which phenomena to include and how to approach these phenomena when generating knowledge – and eventually whether the produced research is sufficiently refined to address the complexities of young people's practices. In the urge to classify and categorize these practices, some research perspectives focus heavily on the motivations, actions, experiences and risks of individuals. Studies that produce knowledge about the multiple phenomena contributing to enact young people's practices, however, often seem to suppress that urge and make use of more transgressive conceptualizations that allow for inclusion of also social and technological aspects. These studies furthermore tend to transgress traditional methodological approaches and instead adopt explorative, innovative and context-sensitive methods that expand the nuances of the practices and of the conditions, contexts and circumstances young people are part of.

Based on these discussions, I suggest a transmethodological approach that takes the instability of the practices into account. This entails an openness towards ambiguous conceptualizations of the field, a more processual perspective of young people's practices as enactments of both individual, social and technological phenomena, and a use of multiple explorative online and offline methods drawing on different disciplines and different theoretical ways of thinking. This transmethodological approach cannot be predetermined, but the conceptualizations, the perspectives and the methods used to approach the field need to be situated and contentiously developed as the phenomenon likewise unfolds through and – transgresses boundaries – of the researcher's approaches to the field. Conceptualizations and perspectives of the field need to be sensitive to change and flexible in relation to the variations inherent to an emerging phenomenon in constant flux. Furthermore, the methods used to explore this phenomenon need to be similarly refined and combined in ways that allow researchers to follow the volatile and

unpredictable movements of the practices by using of an array of differentiated methods in order to access new and altered individual, social and technological entry points to the field. It may be uncommon to transgress the taken-for-granted ideals of conceptual and methodological rigidity and their operationalization and standardized research ambitions. However, this article argues that, in order to produce a more comprehensive perspective of complex phenomena, e.g. young people's sexualized digital practices involving imagery, future research might benefit from using such a transmethodological approach.

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About the author

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