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Confound and ‘hot’ or ‘desperate’ and ‘cowardly’? Meanings of young men’s sexting practices in youth sexting culture

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ABSTRACT
Young men tend to be constructed as being at low risk of harm and able to extract value from sexting, compared to young women. Drawing upon findings from a qualitative study exploring practices and perceptions of sexting among 14–18 year-old participants in southeast England, I discuss the meanings and norms surrounding young men’s sexting practices. I outline how these meanings and norms underpinned perceptions regarding the value available to young men through sexting. Young men were not, however, equally able to extract value and social capital through sexting, and participants discussed examples of the social shaming of young men who sext. I discuss how young men took up diverse positions with regard to masculine heterosexuality within youth sexting culture, in which they reworked and challenged the ideals and assumptions inherent to ‘hegemonic masculinity’. I draw two conclusions: firstly, it should not be assumed that young men are inherently able to gain value through sexting; secondly, narratives of risk and shame may mean that while young men distance themselves from sexting, gendered assumptions and inequalities regarding bodily and sexual expression remain.

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Introduction
Public discussion surrounding youth sexting – involving the digital production and exchange of personal sexual messages and images among under 18s – is shaped by gendered assumptions about the nature of young people’s practices and the risks and harms they are encountering (Hasinoff 2015). Young people who sext are considered at risk of potentially irreparable psychological, social and reputational harm, particularly if their images are ‘leaked’ and made public (Döring 2014). Predominant narratives suggest young women are most at risk, in a depiction of youth sexting as involving hormonal, sex-driven young men pressuring or coercing vulnerable young women into sexting, and later sharing their images around the peer group for social gain (Dobson and Ringrose 2015; Herriot and Hiseler 2015).

Within this narrative, there is less scrutiny of young men’s sexting practices and experiences compared to young women (Hasinoff 2015; Karaian 2014; Salter 2015). Harvey and
Ringrose (2015) suggest that this lack of emphasis on young men reflects broader debates about young people and sex, in which young men’s sexuality is constructed as active, inherent and ‘uncontrollable’. The idea that young men will exploit and harm young women through sexting for sexual and social gain is, therefore, assumed typical of adolescent masculine heterosexuality (see Herriot and Hiseler 2015).

This paper discusses findings from qualitative interviews with young people aged 14–18 to explore how they constructed young men’s sexting practices. The study upon which this paper is based aimed to understand young people’s perspectives on the nature of risky and harmful sexting practices, and the meanings and norms underpinning these practices. The analysis revealed that constructs of masculinity shaped the value that young men could extract from sexting and contributed to the social shaming of some young men who sext. The young men distanced themselves from sexting, and expressed alternative ideas about what it means to be ‘a man’ in this context. The findings have implications for understandings of adolescent masculine heterosexuality and challenge the reification of young men as inherently able to seek value in youth sexting culture. Narratives of risk and shame may explain why the young men distanced themselves from sexting while reproducing gendered assumptions and inequalities about bodily and sexual expression.

**Literature review**

**Young men’s position in youth sexting culture**

While a meta-analysis of the prevalence of youth sexting found that young men and women sext at similar rates (Madigan et al. 2018), qualitative research suggests there are differences in the meanings young people ascribe to their practices (Lippman and Campbell 2014). Qualitative research shows that youth sexting is a gendered phenomenon in which young men are able to seek value and social capital through sexting at relatively low risk compared to young women (Albury et al. 2013; Bond 2010; Coy et al. 2013; Harris et al. 2013; Phippen 2012). In a study conducted in two inner-city London secondary schools, Ringrose et al. (2012) reveal how gender double standards pervade youth sexting culture. They found that young men were lauded for sexting and can seek value as a ‘lad’ through the practice, while young women experience pressure to sext to please young men, but risk social shaming as ‘sluts’ for doing so.

Discussing these findings, Harvey and Ringrose (2015) explain how a system of ‘ratings’ enables young men to use sexting to gain friendship and establish their position in local peer hierarchies. Similarly, among young adults, Burkett (2015) found that sexting facilitates peer bonding and status enhancement among young men, in which images of young women are ‘trophies’ through which young men evidence masculine heterosexual accomplishment. Salter (2015) suggests that these images represent powerful symbols through which young men gain esteem and status within the peer group. These social processes, combined with the delegitimisation of young women’s sexual and bodily self-expression, underpin non-consensual sexting and privacy violations affecting young women (see Setty 2018b).

The normalisation of gendered assumptions about sex and sexual expression is associated with victim-blaming among young people, who characterise harmful sexting practices as ‘boys being boys’ and place responsibility on young women to anticipate and avoid risk (Burkett 2015; Dobson and Ringrose 2015; Salter 2015). Meanwhile, when
images of young men are shared in the peer group, they tend to be constructed as entertainment and humour. Based on research with young adults, Salter (2015) suggests that young men are considered able to ‘laugh off’ any reaction from peers, which tends to be jokey in nature compared to the shaming and humiliation of young women. He argues that young men have the benefit of nuance in the meanings ascribed to their sexting practices; the context and intent matter to how their practices are defined, which is less apparent for young women (also see Albury et al. 2013). It is suggested that youth sexting culture thus reflects and reinforces the longstanding reification of young men’s sexuality as natural, active and legitimate, and young women as passive ‘gatekeepers’ of risk (Dobson and Ringrose 2015; Hasinoff 2015).

Previous research suggests, however, that young men are required to portray a legible masculine heterosexuality in their practices. Ringrose et al. (2012) found that young men are subject to social policing, in which those who fail to comply with masculine heterosexual imperatives in youth sexting culture, e.g. obtaining and distributing images of young women, are subject to homophobic bullying. Harvey and Ringrose (2015) discuss how while these images may represent social capital for young men, they have to be of the ‘right’ young women, showing the ‘right’ amount of their bodies. Further, Burkett’s (2015) research troubles the perception that young men find it easy to laugh off unauthorised distribution. A male participant recounted an experience of non-consensual sexting in which his friends photographed him in the shower and distributed the image as a ‘joke’ which he found ‘deeply confronting and embarrassing’ (ibid: 851). Young men’s experiences and construction of themselves and their position in youth sexting culture may, therefore, involve more than a straightforward power dynamic in which they exploit young women for sexual and social gain at low risk to themselves.

**Meanings of masculine heterosexuality**

Previous research exploring youth sexting suggests the presence and organising frame of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, in which sexual accomplishment confers status and esteem on young men, often at the expense of young women. Connell (1995) theorised hegemonic masculinity as the privileging and legitimising of a particular way of being ‘a man’ with a corresponding subordination and marginalisation of other forms of masculinity (e.g. gay men). While men may be unable or unwilling to achieve the standards of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (2005) suggests that masculinities are ‘the configuration of practice associated with the social position of men’ (13) and so impact upon how men make sense of themselves. Essentially, men organise themselves around hegemonic masculinity. It is constructed in oppositional terms to femininity, and involves power and dominance over women (Holland and Thomson 2010).

Constructions of masculinities have implications for how individuals experience, make sense of and position themselves in terms of sex and sexuality (see Powers-Albanesi 2010). Holland et al. (1998) suggest that heterosexual power dynamics position men as desiring subjects, agents and pursuers, while women are passive objects and receivers. They argue that men can be rewarded and empowered through this dynamic, while women are constrained. Male sexuality may be seen as threatening, but it is constructed as inherent and natural, thus incumbent upon women to manage. Within this context, they argue that young men are learning to be sexual agents in the pursuit of pleasure and that masculine
heterosexuality is about power. Among teenaged young people, Chambers, Tincknell, and Van Loon (2004) found that homophobic bullying among young men and misogynistic bullying toward young women were used to establish and police such masculine heterosexuality. For young men, sexuality was about performance and being ‘macho’, and there was a culture of ‘laddishness’ characterised by sexual objectification and misogyny. Such laddishness was a way of asserting masculine power and cultivating standing in the peer group.

These forms of masculinity are, nevertheless, ‘contested and resisted’ (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2003, 85) although those who distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity remain subject to its surveillance and discipline (Holland et al. 1998). Among 11–14 year-olds in twelve London schools, Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman (2002) show how young men negotiated the contradictions of masculinity, and positioned themselves in terms of dominant narratives surrounding toughness and action. Likewise, in interviews 15–18 year-old young men in a school in California, Pascoe (2003) uncovered varied definitions and narratives around the self and masculinity within the school hierarchy, in which participants were ‘attempting to infuse their own identity with recognizably masculine characteristics’ (1435). Connell (2005) suggests young men learn and experience masculinity in multiple, fluid and diverse ways. While they may never achieve the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, it is about norms and value systems (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Young men’s displays in youth sexting culture reflect these cultural values and social processes. Harvey and Ringrose (2015) discuss how young men communicate their possession of young women through collecting, tagging and rating their images, and share their sexual accomplishments and post images of their muscles to show their heterosexual desirability. They describe sexting as part of a ‘commodification of the self’ in which the ‘norms through which hegemonic masculinity could be performed and realized’ (362). They found that some young men were critical of and distanced themselves from the ‘ratings’ system in youth sexting culture, but nevertheless constructed themselves in terms of hegemonic masculinity.

Making sense of young men’s experience of youth sexting culture is not, therefore, about reifying a hegemonic masculinity predicated upon the exploitation and misogynistic treatment of young women. Instead, it is about understanding how models of heterosexual masculinity infuse and shape young people’s practices and perceptions. More fluid conceptualisations of masculinity are associated with suggestions that masculine identity and expression is becoming more ‘hybrid’. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) suggest that hybrid masculinities involve young men selectively incorporating forms of subordinate masculinity or ‘borrowing’ from other masculinities. They question, however, whether these masculinities challenge existing systems of power and inequality, or reproduce them in ‘historically new ways’ (248).

Anderson’s (2009) conceptualisation of ‘inclusive masculinities’ argues that horizontally- (rather than hierarchically-) structured masculinities challenge gender and sexual inequalities. He suggests there are now more varied and inclusive, and less homophobic performances of masculinity. His theorising is based on ethnographic research with young men in UK and the US, conducted with McCormack, in which changing masculinities were conceived of in terms of broader sociocultural change around attitudes to gender and sexuality and patterns of individualism (Anderson and McCormack 2018). McCormack (2011) discusses how 16–18 year-old young men in a high school in the UK, for example,
displayed an opposition to homophobia, misogyny and aggression, while achieving status and ‘popularity’ in a more inclusive social order.

Anderson and McCormack (2018) suggest that new understandings of adolescent male masculinities are required. They argue that male peer groups are increasingly characterised by emotional openness, peer tactility, softening gender codes and decreased bullying, homophobia and biphobia. Unlike more ‘hybrid’ masculinities in which social inequalities may remain, Anderson and McCormack (2018) argue that inclusive masculinities can support drives for equality. O’Neill (2015) has criticised such theorising, however, for failing to account for power relations between women and men, and how ‘… sexual access to women’s bodies continues to play a key role in the organisation of masculine subjectivities and men’s practices’ (12).

Young men may be becoming more emotionally open and relationship- (rather than sex-) oriented. Bell, Rosenberger, and Ott (2015) found that among low-income, African-American 14–16 year-old young men, there was a desire for intimate, long-term relationships characterised by openness and honesty. The young men discussed feelings of vulnerability and dependence, and desired relationships for more than just sex. However, it seemed they constructed men as initiators and ‘protectors’ of women, and distinguished between ‘special’ partners whom they respect and those they would ‘just’ want to have sex with. Ringrose and Harvey (2015) similarly show how young men desire images of young women but derogate those who appear in them as ‘shameless’. Thus, it is important to explore how diverse and fluid conceptualisations and expressions of masculinity reproduce (or do not challenge) gendered power relations and inequalities.

**Methods**

**Aims and research questions**

This paper draws from a qualitative study of young people’s perspectives on risk and harm in sexting. The aim is to understand the meanings of young men’s sexting practices and how young men positioned themselves in terms of masculine heterosexuality in youth sexting culture. The analysis was guided by the following questions:

1. **What are young people’s perceptions of and attitudes toward young men’s sexting practices?**
2. **What are the norms and standards that shape the value young men obtain through sexting and, correspondingly, the social shaming of young men who sext?**
3. **How do young men position themselves in terms of the norms, standards and value systems of heterosexual masculinity in youth sexting culture?**

The analysis intended to understand how the social processes and cultural practices that underpin risk and harm in youth sexting culture shape how young men construct a masculine heterosexual identity and make decisions within this context.

**Methodological approach**

This study was designed to enable participants to produce and define meaning. I did not use the word ‘sexting’; rather, I explained the practice and asked participants what they
knew and thought about it. The qualitative approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of how participants constructed and navigated the social meanings and norms that shaped youth sexting culture, how they formed their views about sexting, and how they made decisions as sexting actors and bystanders.

**Data collection**

I conducted group and one-to-one interviews as a sole researcher with 41 young people aged 14–18 recruited from schools and youth clubs in Surrey, England. The groups comprised three to seven participants in private areas in the research sites. I conducted four groups in a school, two comprising young men and two comprising young women. I conducted five groups in the youth clubs; two comprising young men while the remaining were mixed-gender. I also held one joint interview with two young men in a school. The interviews explored participants’ use of technology, meanings and understandings of the ‘ethics’ of sexting in terms of privacy and consent, and practices and perceptions surrounding sexting. I invited participants to a one-to-one interview, and interviews were held with four young women and two young men in the schools. These interviews explored personal beliefs and experiences sexting. I asked participants about their experiences of sexting, and the conversation flowed depending on their perspective.

Participants gave informed consent to participate (with gatekeepers assessing the competency of under 16s). Safeguarding and protection from harm arrangements were agreed with research sites. While the production and exchange of sexual images of under 18s is illegal, a protection from harm approach – in which disclosures were only made if there was a risk of harm – was followed, rather than a criminal justice approach, so as to allow young people to speak openly and honestly about sexting.

In this paper, I focus on heterosexual dynamics as participants emphasised a heterosexual masculinity as characterising youth sexting culture. I explore how young men positioned themselves relative to this. While the findings are based predominantly upon the group interviews because this is where the majority of the data about the norms and meanings surrounding sexting was produced, I occasionally draw upon the one-to-one interviews when discussing young men’s position in youth sexting culture.

**Sample and recruitment**

The sample comprised 23 young men, 16 young women and two young people identifying as gender fluid. All identified as from a white background. Twenty-nine described themselves as heterosexual, five as gay/lesbian, three as bisexual, two as pansexual, one as bi-romantic asexual and one did not specify. Most reported not having a disability, although three stated they had a physical disability, six a mental disability, one a learning disability and one a sensory disability. Participants were predominantly aged 15–17 (two were 14 and two were 18 years of age). Most groups comprised young people of a similar age, although three groups in the youth clubs were more mixed. All groups represented naturally occurring friendship groups.

Recruitment was conducted via gatekeepers. In the schools, the study was advertised to pupils and interviews arranged with those who expressed interest. One of these schools was in a relatively affluent, semi-rural area, while the other catered to a more diverse
student population. In the youth clubs, I spoke with young people about the research, and interested young people came to the room where the research was being conducted at the advertised time. The youth clubs served a diverse mix of young people, ranging, in one gatekeeper’s words, from ‘mainstream middle-class’ to those experiencing deprivation school failure/exclusion, mental health issues and learning difficulties.

**Reflexivity and positionality**

I was mindful of my position as a heterosexual young adult woman and wanted to avoid inhibiting the young men. I encouraged them to speak openly and honestly, and did not censor their experiences, either as an adult or woman. I found the participants, including the young men, engaged well and appreciated discussing the issues with a non-judgmental, open-minded and supportive adult (see Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002). The interviews were, however, spaces in which participants gave accounts of events and constructed and performed legible gendered sexualities. I permitted an open discussion and avoided challenging their accounts, including their articulation of gendered assumptions and inequalities, but critically engage with their accounts here (see Flood 2003).

**Analysis**

I was guided by symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework, in which individuals are conceived of as acting based on shared meaning communicated through symbols and incorporated into self-concepts through reflexive processes of interpretation (Blumer 1969). Crofts et al. (2015) suggest that the meanings of sexting actors and practices shape how individuals and objects are treated and the ‘status’ they hold and project. These processes shape young people’s decisions, although their situated individual and interpersonal experiences may differ as they incorporate meaning actively and reflexively into their decision-making and self-concepts.

Through symbolic interactionism, I analysed how young men constructed and positioned themselves regarding dominant narratives surrounding masculine heterosexuality. I took a grounded theory approach to understanding these processes and foregrounding the participants’ perspectives (Charmaz 2014a, 2014b). I engaged in close reading of the transcripts, coding line-by-line, building up from description to interpretation. While the analysis was informed by literature and concepts, I was interested not just in affirming existing knowledge but in how participants incorporated, reworked and challenged sociocultural meanings and norms. I describe how young men positioned themselves in terms of broader narratives and how risk and shame may explain the persistence of gendered assumptions and inequalities surrounding bodily and sexual expression. The findings have importance, therefore, for understanding changing meanings of masculinity and the implications of such change for gendered power dynamics and inequalities (O’Neill 2015).

**Findings**

Participants positioned young men as accruing value through sexting, including through obtaining, viewing and distributing images of young women. They constructed heterosexual masculinity as active and legitimate; however, the demands and standards inherent to
this meant young men were at risk of social shaming and ostracism for sexting. The young men distanced themselves from sexting and constructed alternative forms of heterosexual masculinity, while continuing to take pleasure in viewing images of young women.

**Meanings of young men's sexting practices**

Participants constructed young men’s sexuality and, relatedly, their sexting practices as more acceptable and less concerning than young women’s. They described young men as naturally sexually desiring, ‘hormonal’, and ‘sex driven’. Resultantly, they considered sexting to be an ‘expected’ (Ruby, F, 16) part of their gender role. Participants predominantly discussed young men’s sexting practices in terms of viewing images of young women, with Bob (M, 17) saying that ‘it’s a natural male reaction’ to want to look at women’s bodies. This desire to view images of young women promoted bonding among young men, with Leo (M, 17) saying that ‘if a guy got a picture of some girl’s … tits, then the next day, they’d be like, yeah, look at this, and I’d be like, nice’.

Participants felt that young men can gain status as a ‘hero’ (Bob, M, 17) through obtaining and distributing images of young women, which enables them to accrue ‘power’ (Tom, M, 16) or ‘lad points’ (Becky, F, 15). However, as Harvey and Ringrose (2015) emphasise, these images need to be of the ‘right’ young women. John (M, 17) said that such images are ‘a trophy, like if you were able to get a picture off a hot girl, it’s be like, oh, he’s been able to get that, he’s cool’. Some young men distanced themselves from these practices, but perceived that young men gain value, with Chris (M, 16) stating that he ‘… can imagine they’re kinda like, oh my god, you’ve got a nude off this person’.

Participants conceived of young men as ‘pursuers’ (Ling, M, 17) of young women. Ling and the other young men in his group described young men as motivated by ‘sexual attraction’ to young women. The images are accomplishments, not just of obtaining an image, but as ‘proof’ of sexual desirability and activity, and as enabling young men to feel like a ‘macho character’ (Ling, 17, M). Producing and sharing images of themselves was constructed as legitimate. Ling’s fellow participant John (17, M) explained that ‘if a boy goes topless, it’s a lot more of a norm … and no one will bat an eyelid’. Participants perceived young men as accruing value through being seen as ‘hot’ and ‘attractive’ (Lily, F, 17), and as showing self-confidence and pride in their bodies.

… if the guy’s got enough balls – no pun intended – to take a picture of their dick and send it then that probably means they’re either vaguely proud of their penis, they’re not gonna send like tiny thing, just like, hey just … look at this, send me boobs, it doesn’t really work … So if it gets leaked they’re probably like, yeah that’s my penis, look at it. (Jessie, F, 15)

Participants felt that terms such as ‘man whore’ and ‘fuck boy’ can be attributed to some young men who sext, but some of the young women felt they were more ‘jokey’ (Charlie, F, 17) and refer to young men not treating young women well, rather than being about sexual expression per se. Some participants felt that these labels enable young men to gain value or ‘lad points’ in the peer group (Becky, F, 15 and Mark, M, 15). Kevin (F, 14) stated that it is ‘socially acceptable’ for young men to have sex, and that ‘one thing they’d try to do is, just be … hard and try to fuck every girl in the playground’. Participants felt that these meanings and norms introduced a power dynamic in which young men gain from sexting at the expense of young women who carry the
risk. Labelling young men as sexually active/accomplished seemed not to come with the shame and stigma that such labels (e.g. ‘slut’) entailed for young women.

**Risk and shame for young men**

Participants felt that images of both young men and women are distributed around the peer group. They perceived young men as experiencing ‘jokes’ and ‘banter’ for sexting, with their images being distributed as a ‘laugh’. Images of young men were defined as ‘jokey’, ‘comical’ and less serious in nature than those of young women. The groups of young men discussed how ‘banter’ and ‘joking’ is a typical part of male peer groups and tends to diminish quickly, so long as the target ‘just takes it for a while’ (Kyle, M, 16) and does not take himself too seriously. Young men contrasted this with how they felt young women behave. One group discussed how ‘boys don’t have as much drama as girls, because boys can get over it quick whereas girls usually hold a grudge’ and ‘wouldn’t forget it as quickly as we would’ (Gary, M, 15). As such, participants considered young men to be at less risk than young women in youth sexting culture.

The treatment of young men may, however, go further than this. While participants constructed an ideal type of masculinity projected through sexting, young men risk social shaming for failing to reach these culturally approved standards and expectations. Participants felt that there is an emphasis on what young men ‘look like’ in their images, for example ‘his size’, rather than the fact ‘they’ve sent the photo’ as is the case for young women (Marley, F, 16). If young men are to sext, participants emphasised making sure ‘it looks good’ (Adam, M, 15). The group below discussed how a young man was bullied about his image:

Becky (F. 15): There’s a boy, it happened at our school, he sent a dick pic to somebody and it went around the whole school, and he doesn’t seem to care.
Brian (M. 15): And there’s another kid who did it … And he was bullied for it.
Becky: Yeah, he left school because he couldn’t cope with it.
I: So, there’s one boy it happened to, he doesn’t care?
Becky: He really doesn’t care … There’s another boy, he got given a nickname due to his picture.
I: What was that?
Becky: Hulk penis. It was green.
Sam (M, 15): It was disgusting.
I: So, the appearance of it … he had a hard time?
Mark (M, 15): I’m just saying, thank God, I never saw this.
Becky: And everyone bullied him so he left [laughter]. It was not a nice sight.

It was unclear the pre-existing social position of these young men, while the young man who did not ‘seem to care’ may have ‘looked good’ and/or may have joined in the ‘banter’. Regardless, these participants conceived of the other as leaving the school because of the bullying he got for his appearance. The context in which these young men engaged in sexting was also not apparent. The context seemed important to status they project. For example, the young men emphasised the importance of avoiding looking ‘desperate’ in their sexual practices. They were critical, for example, of non-consensual sexting practices, in which young men send unsolicited images of themselves (‘dick pics’) to young women in attempt to gain images back. Such young men were described as potentially ‘creepy’ (John, M, 17) and ‘desperate’ (Chris, M, 16). Young men felt that they had to
balance being ‘pursuers’ with just ‘letting things happen’ so as not to look like they have had to try too hard.

Dan (M, 15): Like, you’d get to know someone first.
Simon (M, 15): Like, you wouldn’t really ask them –
Adam (M, 15): Yeah, it’s just happens.
Dan: You’d slowly get to that stage, rather than like straight away being like, send me a pic.

Young men who fail to adhere to these standards of heterosexual masculinity were at risk of being shamed and ostracised. Naomi (F, 15) recounted a young man who had sent unsolicited images to young women:

… there was one boy who was sending pictures to like every girl and popping up to every girl. And I guess he hadn’t really got any friends for it and he’s really in a bad place.

Naomi said that this was the ‘one example where that’s happened’ that she could think of, suggesting that so long as young men fall on the right side of heterosexual pursuit, they can be celebrated as ‘heroes’ or ‘lads’. One group of young men distinguished between the ‘fuck boys’, who they saw as accruing power through heterosexual masculinity, and those who ‘won’t stop’ and are ‘creepy’, ‘weird’ and perverted (Kyle, M, 16). Being ‘in control’ as ‘pursuers’ seemed paramount. Lily (F, 17) recounted how young women together at sleepovers would message young men, while posing as individuals, and encourage them to send images. Lily described this as a ‘game’ in which the young man becomes a joke for people to laugh at. While this flips the issue of consent, in that the young man’s consent and knowledge is violated, the ‘joke’ is about their lack of control. Andy and Chris (both M, 16) explained that in this context, the young man looks ‘stupid’ and ‘desperate’ for falling for the ruse of young women.

Young men’s position in youth sexting culture was, therefore, precarious. They could seek value through the ideals of hegemonic masculinity, but were at risk of social shaming for failing to reach these standards. Participants were cognisant of these risks, and incidents of unauthorised distribution worked as cautionary tales in the peer group (see Setty 2018a). When I asked whether young men are not as affected by this as young women, Tee (non-binary, 18) was adamant that ‘it’s not joking, it’s horrible to the person’. Indeed, when I asked one group of young men what they feel they struggle with that young women may not (after a discussion about young women’s insecurities) they discussed the pressure to be ‘macho’ (John, M, 17) and not show ‘weakness’ (Tom, M, 16) which means they hide how they feel to peers. The normalisation of social shaming as banter and the emphasis on young men to show resilience may obscure the risks and difficulties they face.

**Alternative masculine heterosexualities in youth sexting culture**

The young men distanced themselves from sexting, describing it as ‘risky’ and ‘pointless’. They constructed alternative masculinities, and one positioned himself outside of heterosexual masculinity entirely. Alongside this disavowal of sexting was an ongoing desire to view and take pleasure from images of young women, which some attempted to reconcile with their constructions of ‘ethics’ and perceptions of risk.
One group of young men constructed non-consensual sexting (e.g. unsolicited image-sharing and unauthorised distribution of images) as risking damaging rather than enhancing young men’s status. They described young men who engage in these practices as ‘showing off’ (James, M, 16) and projecting a ‘basic’ form of ‘alpha’ (Bond, M, 18) masculinity. These participants were aged 18 (Bond), 17 (Bob) and 16 (James). Bond tended to dominate discussions and his contributions seemed to encourage the group to construct themselves as mature and thoughtful. They positioned themselves as taking an ethical approach of keeping sex private and intimate so as to protect young women’s modesty and reputations, and not feeling the need to ‘show dominance’ (Bond, M, 18). They felt that rather than gaining ‘lad points’ through sexting they may alienate young women, who see it as ‘horrible’ and ‘immature’.

While saying they eschew sexting, when I asked what they would do if someone had an image of a young woman, they discussed viewing and taking pleasure from the images of young women. In another group, John (M, 17) stated that ‘I’ll admit that it’s probably a bit of a scumbag thing to say, but … if you’ve got a picture, I’d be like, yeah alright, but I’d hate to invade her privacy and get him to send it to me … [but] then you’ve seen it and you’re not … missing out on anything’. His fellow participant Tom (M, 16) said that ‘you … don’t want to be … that guy’ but he would want to look at the images. Andy (15, M) distinguished between being ‘up for a quick look’ with widespread distribution, which he constructed as less acceptable, as did other young men.

Young men distinguished between the young women they would want to look at – whom they described as ‘dodgy’, ‘slutty’ and ‘attention-seeking’ – with those they consider ‘girlfriends’. John (M, 17) constructed his adherence to an ethical approach in terms of a ‘protective masculinity’:

He’s just a bit of a dick for doing that, like why would you … she’s your girlfriend? Why would you want … your girlfriend, ex-girlfriend, being seen by everyone? I just don’t get it. I don’t get why boys who are in a relationship and get pictures of their girlfriend show it to their mates, like why would you want, like she’s your girlfriend, not anyone else’s?

A group of younger young men were less concerned about the ethics of viewing images of young women. They described it as ‘delving into the unknown’ (Kyle, M, 16) and they joked with one another about the excitement of finding out that another young man has images. They were, however, cautious of engaging in sexting themselves and described how young men tend now to share images ‘more privately’ around their ‘group of friends … [rather than] round everyone’ (Simon, M, 15) because of incidents in which young people have been punished for sexting. They conceived of viewing images of young women in small group contexts as a low-risk, enjoyable activity.

These young men derogated young women who sext and discussed how sexting in relationships is unnecessary because they ‘have the girl’ and ‘don’t need the proof’ (Simon, M, 15). Other young men questioned the value of the images. Participants constructed physical sex as more valuable than sexting. They characterised sexting as indicating ‘cowardice’ and a lack of experience, and questioned why people would sext if they could be having sex:

Sam (F, 15): Why don’t you just fuck them?
Mark (M, 15): Instead of sending like pictures to each other, just do it in real life.
Sam: Go on [Mark]
Becky (F, 15): If your brave enough to share it on camera –
Brian (M, 15): You should be
Mark: Brave enough.

A group of older young men said the goal now is to be ‘having sex’ and that sexting is ‘like a couple of bars below having sex’ (John, M, 17). Images may be ‘interesting’ to look at (Dan, 15, M) but do not necessarily prove sexual accomplishment. Some of the young women discussed how now that ‘people have had … sexual experiences’ the body is less mystifying and exciting, so sexts do not confer as much value (Rosie, F, 17). Young men constructing sexting as ‘cowardly’ and lower down the hierarchy than physical sex may enjoy viewing images of young women, but constructed themselves as interested in the more significant act of physical sex.

Some young men may position themselves outside of the ideals of heterosexual masculinity. Ben (16, M) emphasised his difference to his fellow participants (who included John and Ling above). While friends, Ben said he was not involved in the sexual and relational culture they described, and would not view images of young women. He described sexting as ‘wrong’ and ‘stupid’, and one-to-one said he is more ‘mature’ than other young people and disdainful of a heterosexual sexting culture involving men ‘flexing their muscles’ and looking at images of young women. However, in the group interview, he joined in with discussions about young women being passive and needy, and responsible for negotiating consensual sexual encounters with hormonal, sex-driven young men. This difference is revealing of how young men may adhere to gendered norms and expectations socially, while distancing themselves from such imperatives on a personal level. This may also suggest that the impossibilities of reaching the ideals of hegemonic masculinity may involve individuals constructing themselves as unwilling or uninterested in doing so.

**Discussion**

Masculinity may empower men sexually (Holland et al. 1998), but how does this work in youth sexting culture? As in previous research (e.g. Ringrose et al. 2012), participants believed that young men extract value from sexting as ‘heroes’ and ‘lads’ by obtaining and distributing images of young women. They ascribed legitimacy to heterosexual masculinity by labelling young men ‘pursuers’ who ‘take pride’ in their bodies (see Salter 2015). The value of sexting to young men was constructed around hegemonic masculinity, in which pursuit, objectification of women, control and accomplishment characterised young men’s sexting practices or, at least, the practices constructed as offering status and esteem to young men (see Connell 1995, 2005; Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002).

Participants constructed the ideals of hegemonic masculinity as conferring value in youth sexting culture, but which young men struggle – or are unwilling – to reach (see Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Naezer and Ringrose (2018) suggest that, unlike young women, young men may not distance themselves from sexting because they do not encounter the same level of risk, but my findings suggest that young men do encounter risk. Images of young men were defined as ‘jokey’ and ‘comical’, and participants described young men as having little to lose in the banter and teasing that follows ‘exposure’ as sexters (see Jonsson et al. 2015; Salter 2015). Yet, young men’s position was precarious. There was emphasis on what they look like in their images, perhaps
reflecting the increased visibility and scrutiny of men’s bodies in society more broadly (Salter 2015). Participants emphasised the need for young men to be ‘in control’ sexually and avoid looking ‘desperate’ or as though they have had to ‘try too hard’. Young men who do not adhere to these standards and expectations risk social shaming and ostracism.

Within this context of risk, young men labelled sexting ‘stupid’ and ‘pointless’, and constructed alternative heterosexual masculinities in which they abstained from sexting. They did not construct this decision as subordinate. Some aligned themselves with a more ‘inclusive masculinity’ that eschews the ill-treatment and objectification of young women (see Anderson 2009; Anderson and McCormack 2018; McCormack 2011). They expressed disdain toward young men who engage in non-consensual sexting practices and seek status through the images of young women (see Burkett 2015). However, this construction of ethics was shaped by beliefs about young men being initiators and protectors of passive and vulnerable young women (see Bell, Rosenberger, and Ott 2015) and gender inequalities pervaded their discussions (see O’Neill 2015).

Most of the young men described their willingness – albeit some expressed discomfort – to view images of young women. They distinguished between the young women in the pictures, whom they described as ‘dodgy’ and ‘slutty’, from those they considered ‘girlfriend material’ with whom they do not need to sext as they do not need the ‘proof’ (see Lippman and Campbell 2014). Some questioned what sexting actually ‘proves’. Harvey and Ringrose (2015) discuss how sexting can evidence sexual desirability and accomplishment, particularly among younger teenagers. While a group of young men were more celebratory about young men who obtain images of young women, others felt the body is no longer as mystifying to young people and that sexting suggests ‘cowardice’ rather than accomplishment. Lewis, Marston, and Wellings (2013) discuss how young people construct a sequential process of moving through the ‘bases’ of sexual activity, in which penetrative sex is at the top of the hierarchy. The relegation of sexting to a lesser act than physical sex, combined with the derogation of young women who appear in the images as ‘sluts’ shaped young men’s disavowal of sexting beyond being ‘up for a look’ at whatever images may be circulating.

Youth sexting culture is contextualised by a broader media, educational and legal landscape in which young people are warned about risk, and shame and regret are used to deter young people from sexting (Albury 2017). Participants were cognisant of the social and reputational risks they face in sexting (see Setty 2018a). Consequently, young men may have been distancing themselves from risk rather than there being the sociocultural change required for the disruption of gendered assumptions and inequalities surrounding bodily and sexual expression. The young men articulated a construction of themselves as masculine through their disavowal of sexting which reaffirmed some of the tenets of hegemonic masculinity and enabled them to take pleasure in young women’s bodies while distancing themselves from the risky pursuit of ‘lad points’. Masculinity was constructed in terms of access to women’s bodies, and was implicated in gendered power relations in which young women were given few rights to sexual and bodily expression (see Calder-Dawe and Gavey 2016; O’Neill 2015). Assuming there is a level playing field may, therefore, be ill-conceived (Salter 2015). However, it is necessary to distinguish between the levels at which gendered power operate. Harmful sexting may involve a power play by young men over young women, but it may be unfair to hold young men accountable for a power dynamic that most do not benefit from and may
themselves be harmed by. Encouraging more ethical, egalitarian digital sexual cultures may, instead, require a disruption of narratives of risk and shame, and a deconstruction of norms surrounding masculine and feminine sexuality.

Limitations and avenues for further research

The findings discussed here are not generalisable to all young people, no young men shared experiences of sexting, and the young men’s perceptions and practices were predominantly shared within group interview contexts. The findings suggest that participants’ constructions of masculinity and sexting were shaped by the situated dynamics of the group interviews, for example the age and gender composition, and the particular value systems in play (for example, whether ‘maturity’ and ‘decency’ was emphasised or the celebration of the consumption of images of young women). Further research could interview young men one-to-one to explore how they make sense of the complexities and contradictions of heterosexual masculinity in youth sexting culture, including how they may make space for interpersonal sexting practices and experiences that challenge the assumptions and ideals of hegemonic masculinity. I discuss elsewhere young women’s constructions of pleasurable and consensual sexting despite narratives of risk and shame (Setty 2018b), and interviewing young men who have engaged in sexting may provide similar insights regarding young men.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed how young men positioned themselves regarding heteroexual masculinity in youth sexting culture, in which they distanced themselves from sexting. Previous research (e.g. Burkett 2015; Ringrose et al. 2012; Salter 2015) similarly suggests that young men are not inherently or equally able to accrue value through sexting. Sharing images of young women may be part of bonding and joking in masculine peer groups, but can also be frowned upon (Albury et al. 2013; Burkett 2015; Ringrose and Harvey 2015). Further, while young men may have more freedom to sext, in which the social meanings of their practices are contextualised and nuanced, they are nevertheless subjected to norms and expectations surrounding masculinity in terms of their appearance and practices (Ringrose and Harvey 2015; Salter 2015).

My research suggests that risk and shame discourses affect the social landscape for young men, as well as young women. While sex was positioned as legitimate for young men, (self-) mediated sexuality through sexting was more precarious. Sexting images represented ‘objects’ in youth culture, or powerful symbols through which participants ascribed meaning and policed gender. Sexting could, therefore, be stigmatising for young men (De Ridder 2018). The findings challenge the notion that it is ‘easy being a boy’ and that harmful sexting practices only arise from unequal gender dynamics affecting young women. Young men sought to distance themselves from risk, and their alternative heterosexual masculinities revealed some reworking and incorporation of the tenets of hegemonic masculinity. The emphasis on risk meant, however, that gendered norms and assumptions shaped their constructions and underpinned the shaming of some young men who sext and the ongoing objectification and subordination of feminine sexuality.
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Notes

1. Gatekeepers at the youth clubs did not permit me to hold one-to-one interviews with the young people.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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