

# Defying shame

## Shame-relations in digital sexual assaults

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### Abstract

*This article gives voice to Mathilde, Karen and Amalie: Three young women who had intimate images of themselves shared non-consensually online. Their experiences help build a framework for categorising digital sexual assault (DSA), as well as giving insight into how shame, in cases of DSA, connects to social media affordances. The empirical data was produced during four creative writing workshops. The participants described their experiences during these workshops and they collectively developed strategies for defying shame. This article analyses their experiences of shame, their shame-defying strategies, and the role that social media played in forming types of aggressors and assault experiences. I present what I call the onlooker as a digitally augmented aggressor and I show how this aggressor inflicts shame through the look, as described by Sartre. This results in a discussion of imaginary, progressive contra-shaming, which is one of the four coping strategies that showed empowering potential in relation to DSA.*

## Introduction

Let me start by introducing the three women—here called Amalie, Mathilde and Karen—who are the subjects and the co-researchers of this article. We met for the first time in the autumn of 2017. I had just started my PhD and had been searching for participants who would be willing to engage in a year-long process of talking and writing about digital sexual assault (DSA). At that time, they were in the middle of learning to live with the consequences of these assaults. Karen had heard about the project through activist Emma Holten, whom I had contacted in my search for participants; Amalie became involved through a feminist grassroots organisation; and Mathilde joined after having talked to her.

When I first reached out, I was working with a very broad definition of DSA that included all kinds of non-consensual sharing of intimate images, which is also known as non-consensual pornography or image-based sexual abuse (Maddocks, 2018). However, it quickly became clear that Mathilde, Amalie and Karen had a more specific understanding of the phenomenon, which they all referred to as '*digitale sexkrænkelser*' (digital sexual assault). Consequently, we developed the following definition of DSA:

Digital sharing of sexually explicit or sexualised images when the person in the image(s) is identifiable (potentially through added data) and has not consented to the distribution; and/or harassment, stalking, shaming and bullying of the victims.

This definition does not include all cases of DSA. The need for a definition came from the participants themselves in their attempt to frame what was central to their experiences. Unlike broader definitions of image-based sexual abuse (e.g. McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017; Powell, Henry, Flynn, & Scott, 2019), our definition includes identifiability and harassment. These elements were central to the participants and, while the definition certainly excludes other cases of DSA, it gives an accurate understanding of the basis of this study.

The part of our work that I will present here concentrates on the dynamics of digital exposure and shame in victims, aggressors and the societies to which they belong. In other words, I take a relational approach to shame—shame is seen as contextual and social. I show, primarily through Sartre's concept of the look, how the participants express shame. I will also reflect on the connection between shame and social media because shame is related to the exposure and visibility that social media facilitates.

First, I will present a framework for understanding DSA, representing the range of assaults described by the participants. Second, I introduce various approaches to shame in relation to their experiences. And finally, I discuss ways in which the participants sought to avoid, renegotiate and defy the shaming gaze of others.

Research on image-based sexual abuse often focuses on institutional issues, such as legislation that wrongly criminalises victims for possession of child pornography and which ignores young people's right to sexual agency (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Henry &

Powell, 2015, 2016; Saleh, Grudzinskas, & Judge, 2014), or online risk behaviour and 'sexting' among adolescent as a focus of social work and education (Döring, 2014; Livingstone, 2008; Reyns, Burek, Henson, & Fisher, 2013). Those scholars who take a more structural approach tend to focus on image-based sexual abuse as gendered violence, criticising misogynist systems (Henry & Powell, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Salter, Crofts, & Lee, 2013; Shariff, 2015; Wood & Thompson, 2018). Very few works are based on direct, in-depth conversations with victim-survivors. When they are, the negative psychological consequences are in focus (Bates, 2017) or the subject is describing general sexting practices rather than assault (boyd, 2014; Davidson, 2014; Livingstone, 2008).

In contrast, this article adopts the perspectives of Mathilde, Amalie and Karen exclusively. This enables the analysis to foreground the stories of victim-survivors and interpret them through the values that they imply rather than values defined by a broader educational, health or legal system. This approach is inspired by the study of digital youth culture (Albury, 2017; Hickey-Moody, 2013, 2016; Hjorth & Hendry, 2015; Larsen, 2016). In particular, this work is inspired by danah boyd (2014), whose work on adolescent digital culture aims to represent young people in a way that is not determined by adult values.

Hence, what I have aimed to do is to offer a space for victim-survivors to express, explore and share their experiences, thereby opening the way for a more complex understanding of the relationships between shame and social media, and the coping strategies that they make possible. Voicing these perspectives has an ethical potential, but calling forth a voice that has been silenced or constrained also poses methodological and ethical challenges, to which I will now turn.

## Writing voices

Amalie tilts her head and looks at her computer screen with a quiet laugh. She does this when she is politely trying to accept the writing task that I have given her, even though she does not quite see its purpose. The text that she has just written resulted from a creative writing exercise on working with alternative ways of describing sensory experiences, in this case the taste of liquorice. "It's weird when you get, you know, Superflyers [a kind of black liquorice surrounding a white core] and the white stuff inside tastes like liquorice," she says, "it's white, so it's weird". The rest of us agree, the colour black apparently *can* be used to describe a taste.

The taste of liquorice and experiences of assault are obviously two very different things to write about, but describing the sensory experience of eating liquorice challenges the writer's ability to put into words things for which most people do not have an adequate language. It opens a discussion of how we tend to rely on the metaphors that we already know when describing sensory and emotional experiences, even if these are not always helpful or accurate. Writing can become a way of exploring new potentials of

storytelling and descriptions that open up different ways of grasping and sharing traumatic experiences Pennebaker (1997 [1990]).

### ***Planning the writing workshops***

This writing task was inspired by the work of Pablo Llambías (2015) and Robert Zola Christensen (2005), who are two Danish authors teaching creative writing. Their version of creative writing is one out of four writing approaches, which I combined in the planning of four writing workshops. These approaches are:

- *Creative writing*, as the tradition has developed in the Scandinavian author schools (Llambías, 2015; Zola Christensen, 2005). This approach offers practical tools for teaching writing, and it introduces the concept of the writing workshop as a collective learning space (Lind, 2019; Ringgaard, 2013).
- *Therapeutic writing* is an approach mostly used by therapists and health professionals (Rasmussen, 2017). I have drawn on this tradition when implementing techniques in the writing tasks that can minimise the risk of retraumatisation. Specifically, I relied on McNichol's (2016) reflections on the progress of the therapeutic writing process. In her recommendations, therapeutic writing must move from describing the traumatic event to reflecting on it and eventually reframing it in a way that is easier to live with. Additionally, the therapeutic writing approach increases the opportunities to develop a process that is valuable to the participants (Bolton, 2008; Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006; Pennebaker, 2000; Steenberg, 2013; Steenberg & Ladegaard, 2017; Wright, 2009).
- Writing as a *creative* (Gauntlett, 2007; Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006) or *practice-based* (Hope, 2016) research method involves traditions that are based on the idea that creative expression gives access to different aspects of an experience and can therefore facilitate alternative knowledge production. Seeing the writing workshop as a practice-based method is central, not just with regard to data production but also because it emphasises the relevance of a creative, social and empowering outcome.
- Finally, the writing workshops are also seen as a *participatory research practice*. This describes the participants' influence on the crucial parts of the research process, from data production to analysis (Reestorff et al., 2014). Engaging the participants in decision making has been seen as an attempt to balance the ethical dilemma between creating a safe process sensitive to their vulnerabilities and at the same time trusting their ability to judge which parts of themselves they wanted to share (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). Participation can facilitate this process because it makes it necessary to train the participants to understand the research process, which enables them to give their consent on a more informed basis (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). In addition, it also enhances continuous communication between participants and the researcher, and encourages active reflection on the power dynamics of this relationship (Bell et al., 2004; Tronto, 1994). Finally, participatory research

emphasises that the goals of empowerment and personal or political outcomes are just as important as traditional research outputs (Borg, Karlsson, Kim, & McCormack, 2012).

The creative writing approach offers the writing workshop as a method, where the participants first write, then read and finally discuss their texts (Llambías, 2015). This was the structure used here. The specific writing tasks that I asked them to perform were mostly borrowed from creative or therapeutic writing practitioners. The creative writing tasks were useful in learning basic writing principles, and the therapeutic tasks were useful in facilitating safe writing on sensitive subjects. This method shares traits with elicitation (Rose, 2012), in which creative productions spark conversation. However, the writing workshop constitutes a more collective learning process. This process of learning together is represented in the participatory approach, and it places emphasis on collective rather than individual knowledge production.

This process resulted in 10 creative writing texts on DSA and around five hours of conversation. Despite the fact that not all of the participants finished all of the writing tasks on time, and the fact that one of them did not participate in all of the workshops, writing was still seen to be a crucial tool in finding and sharing experiences because it started an engaged and mutually vulnerable conversation.

### *The ethics of 'being heard'*

During the first workshop, Mathilde said that "I think it would be nice if we could also meet outside of this." As always, she was sitting with a straight back, hair carefully arranged over her shoulders, but her breath was short and her sentences rushed. "Yes, also just because there is somebody who understands you", Karen agreed. They had all searched for connections with other victim-survivors before, but without much luck, and they were grateful for a chance to meet. Mathilde and Amalie in particular maintained a friendship after the workshops, and we all kept in touch occasionally.

As is probably clear, the workshops struck a balance between producing analysable data and empowering participants by giving them a chance to find their own voices and share experiences. Carol Gilligan (1993 [1982]) introduces the concept of giving voice as a way of working against oppression and including representation in the research process. She writes:

If we are serious about recognizing and respecting differences, then we need to hear and encourage the full range of voices within and around us by becoming a society of listeners. Active listening means asking, how might I call forth a voice that is held in silence, a voice under political or religious or psychological constraint? (Gilligan, 2014, p. 104)

The writing workshops were a chance for Mathilde, Karen and Amalie to be heard: by each other, by me, and hopefully by readers of this article as well. This gives a sense of both professional and political urgency, which echoes through the field of feminist ethics of care (Bellacasa, 2017; Held, 2014; Noddings, 2013; Ramdas, 2016; Tronto, 1994). Ethics became a “relational obligation” (Bellacasa, 2017, p. 20) towards the three young women who had opened their lives and minds to me in the hope that I could help them get their stories out.

However, this method does not necessarily offer this chance to everybody because it excludes people who are not comfortable with or capable of writing. The extent of the study—eight months—is a similar challenge because such a long-term commitment may be impossible for many people. This, and the fact that no formal victim networks had been established at that time, also made recruitment difficult. Despite these challenges, Amalie, Mathilde and Karen actually told very different stories about both their assault experiences and their lives in general. They are from different geographical areas, with different class backgrounds, and had different ideas of or attachments to subjects such as sexuality, relationships, feminism and education. The diversity of their assault stories has inspired the following section.

## **A framework for understanding digital sexual assault**

Mathilde and Amalie laughed when Karen put on a confused face and a masculine voice while imitating the ignorant responses that she sometimes gets when sharing her story. “Well yes, ya, yes, I guess I can see that”, she says while dramatically nodding her head. Amalie continues: “I really think there are just so many different stories about it and how it starts and so on, it’s not at all just ‘angry ex-boyfriend shares image’”.

The idea that people (friends, professionals and the public) do not understand what DSA is came up often during the workshops. It was clear that Mathilde, Karen and Amalie resented the fact that discussions of DSA focus in general too much on why young people take and share images and not enough on how DSA stories actually start and develop. They were frustrated about being stereotyped as naive teenagers “ignorant of the inevitable ‘consequences’ of their actions” (Albury, 2017, p. 719), or as Mathilde says: “They don’t see us as victims, often we are viewed as if it was our own fault”. However, nor did they want to be seen solely as ‘ruined’ victims without any hope of redemption. “A lot of the people I met who have experienced it are pretty strong women,” Amalie said, “many have become quite tough because of it”.

What they asked for is a more nuanced understanding of DSA, which focuses not on the presumed ignorance of the victims but rather on the non-consensual acts of the aggressors. In trying to answer this need, I looked at three levels of consent: distribution, production and sexualisation—defining four categories of DSA.

The first category consists of images that are non-consensually distributed but were consensually produced in a consensual sexual situation. These images are referred to here as *consensually produced sexual images*. This covers not only the common example of revenge porn (McGlynn et al., 2017) but also cases in which pictures are stolen (Holten, 2014) or the distributor is simply unknown. This is the case in Mathilde's story. She took the pictures herself and then sent them to someone she was seeing, but she does not know if he was the one who shared them. Her story also has another rarely considered layer because her original images were not identifiable but somebody later added her personal details.

The second category consists of *non-consensually produced images*. These images were produced without the consent and knowledge of the victim, and were subsequently distributed. This category includes pictures from changing rooms (Frederiksen, Sørensen, Sjögren, & Pedersen, 2018); from hacked webcams (Jensen & Frederiksen, 2015); or things like creep shots (Wood & Thompson, 2018), drone porn (Thompson, 2017), and upskirting (Kott, 2017). Karen's story has another example of this kind of DSA: some of the images of her that her ex-boyfriend shared were produced without her knowledge.

The third category consists of *non-sexual images*. These involve cases in which images were not sexual in their original context, but are sexualised through reproduction and distribution (McGlynn et al., 2017). One commonly discussed example of these images is deep fake or Photoshop porn (Sørensen, Frederiksen, & Kirk, 2017), in which an image of the victim's face is edited onto a pornographic body or into a sexualised situation. Amalie's story gives another example of this category: Her images were meant to document weight loss, and she did not originally think of them as sexual; however, they were sexualised through reframing and distribution rather than editing.

The fourth category consists of *coerced images*. These are cases in which the production, the sexual situation and the distribution of images were non-consensual. Coercion may involve psychological violence such as threats (Thisgaard, Tolberg, & Andersen, 2018); manipulation, as in the case of grooming (Sørensen, 2013); or physical violence, as in Karen's case where some of the images were taken while she was being held down.

This framework defines the various kinds of DSA as seen from the victims' perspective. It is important to use a framework that adopts this perspective because it highlights which aspects were non-consensual and thus constituted an assault. This is something that only the victims themselves can know.

## Shame and 'the look' on digital media

I am starting university this summer, and it is also choosing an education. Where are there many young men? I mean, where are there fewest? I am tired of having to think about these things because I just want to get into the programme I want to study, and not have to think about where it is most likely that nobody has seen me.

This is how Mathilde reflects on how the assault influences her life. She goes on to talk about how she is trying to give herself a *fresh start* when entering university life. This involves finding a community where nobody has *seen* her. “You are naked on the Internet,” she explains, “I think it is really shameful”. Here, Mathilde connects shame with being seen, and particularly being seen as “naked on the Internet”. This implies that there is a connection between shame and exposure, and that this exposure is somehow particular to the Internet. This suggested connection serves as a hypothesis for the following analysis.

A relationship between shame and being seen can be found in the work of Sartre (1992 [1943]), where he defines shame as follows: “I am ashamed of *myself* before the *other*” (p. 385). The argument is that to be ashamed you must be ashamed of something, this something is the self, and thus *myself* is the self as an object that the subject *I* can relate to. However, since the *I* will always see itself as a subject, a mediator is needed between the subjective *I* and the objective *myself*. This mediator is the *other*. This means that shame is only possible if there is an *other* present, whose *look* the *I* can internalise and thereby see the *myself*. Shame thus depends on objectification and on being looked at or imagining being looked at by others. With the possibilities of broad exposure that social media offer, *the look* as an analytical concept may be a way to understand shame in a digital context.

However, Mathilde’s experience differs from Sartre’s description of shame in that the *other* takes a different form. For Sartre, the *other* is either present or imagined, but the *other* that Mathilde describes is neither. It is not present because she does not know who might have seen her, but it is not imagined either because she knows that somebody has. Instead, the *other* in this case is *potential*. This implies specific digital media affordances: the people who might have seen the images are not necessarily personified, but they are an abstract, endless potentiality that it is impossible for Mathilde to identify, both because of the incomprehensible number of potential *others* in the digital context and because of the possibility of anonymity that digital media offer (Kofoed, 2013).

This brings us to two temporary conclusions. First, that the concept of the look is useful in analysing experiences of shame in a digital context, because the exposure is an affordance of digital media. Second, that the *other*—in this case, the aggressor—takes different forms due to social media affordances. Before moving further into the analysis of shame, it is therefore relevant to describe the aggressors.

### ***Onlookers and other aggressors***

The kind of *other* that Mathilde describes is a specific kind of aggressor: someone who does not act directly in relation to her, but who becomes an aggressor by seeing the images. I call this kind of aggressor *onlookers*, with some onlookers being potential (as described earlier). The difference between onlookers and *others* is that an onlooker is a specific kind of *other*, whose look is not just shameful but also constitutes an assault.

The onlooker differs from other kinds of aggressors who actively seek to worsen the assault. Amalie describes onlookers as people who see an image when “it is just out there”. She adds that,

It’s not nice, but in a way it is easier to push it away. It’s when people want to contact you or tell you about it or write nasty things to you. That’s almost the worst part. Or when somebody has named you.

Here, she distinguishes between onlookers (who just see), *harassers* (who contact her and confront her with the assault), and people who worsen the assault by adding personal information to the images (here called *aggravators*). Aggravators were also often described as people who re-share images. The perception that re-sharing constitutes a different kind of assault than initial sharing calls for a fourth category of aggressors, which I will call *initiators*. This category includes the people who shared the images the first time and thereby initiated the assault.

Onlookers, harassers, aggravators and initiators all play different roles in relation to the assault experience. They often overlap, but they are also mutually dependent: there would be no initiators if nothing major was initiated, there would be no aggravation without interest from onlookers etc. Therefore, the typology is not meant to reflect a spectrum, and the participants did not necessarily regard any kind of aggressor as definitely worse than the others. Instead, it serves as an analytical framework that enables us to identify specific assaulting acts.

### ***Contextual shame***

Turning to shame again, the onlooker becomes a particularly interesting concept because shame relates to the look. In the following analysis, I will look at different kinds of shame imposed by the onlooker and connected to other aggressors and their contexts. The first example shows how family members can become onlookers, and how this calls for a consideration of family relationships when analysing shame. The second example reflects on the onlooker’s objectification of the victim in relation to sexuality. The final example shows how we may consider the dynamics of different kinds of shame.

When asked to think about the first time that she had to talk to her parents about the assault, Karen writes that:

But to hear her father cry, ask why the pictures were taken, why he and mom had to receive them. That broke her. The feeling of shame was indescribable. It was her fault that her family had been dragged into the drama that she had lived in for months. Her decision, for all this time she had been pushing it further and further away. She was drawn back to when the pictures were taken. Her hands that were held. His tight grasp around her wrists. Her begging for the humiliation to come to an end. She could not see anything, tried to get away, but nothing helped. She can still feel the cold bathroom floor under her feet. [...] She was thrown back into the conversation, screams into the telephone that it is not her fault,

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that she is terribly sorry, that she wishes she could go back and change everything. The reproachful sentences about how she should know better, how she should have handled it. Her body reacts with the same reaction that she has met for months. Sickness rises in her throat, the pressure on her breast is so deep that it hurts.

Because Karen's ex-boyfriend sent the images of her assault to her parents, they have unwillingly become onlookers. However, they differ from other kinds of onlookers in that they did not want to see the images, and they are differently invested in the person—their daughter—whom the images depict. Karen reflects on this investment: "I think it was also about them seeing their own little girl in a situation they didn't want to know about", she says, stressing that one shameful aspect of the assault was that her sexuality became present in their family. Sara Ahmed (2014) describes shame as something that we feel when we have "failed to approximate 'an ideal' that has been given to us through the practices of love" (p. 106). According to Ahmed, shame depends on how we are affectively invested in relationships with others. Because of her investment in the family, Karen felt shame before her father when he accused her of failing the *ideal* of the family and her role as the innocent child.

The next example is Amalie reflecting on how being sexually objectified feels to her:

[I] see myself a little bit as asexual, and I think it's really hard to be made into a mega sex object. It's really weird to be made into a thing [...] when you are assigned a lot of qualities that you can't see in yourself at all.

As Sartre argues, objectification in itself can be shameful; but sexual objectification in Amalie's case performs a specific kind of undoing of the self. Like Ahmed, Elspeth Probyn (2005) describes shame as a betrayal of what one values, or as a "profound intra-subjective moment" that "produces a new sense of self" (Probyn, Bozalek, Shefer, & Carolissen, 2019, p. 325). For Amalie, her sexuality, and thereby the communal and personal investments and values that come with it, are betrayed when she is faced with having to see herself sexualised.

Finally, there are also dynamics between different kinds of shame. Reflecting on how being on social media feels to her, Mathilde writes:

I am sitting on my bed watching an unimportant TV show when I suddenly feel a vibration next to my hand. It's my phone. When I unlock it and the messenger app opens, I find myself in a clinical white room. All the walls are made of glass. Behind the glass, I can see several silhouettes lurking in the room, but I can't see their faces. They don't have any. [...] In the middle of the room is a big round table. In front of each seat is a lamp fixed to the table top. Most of the seats are taken by my nearest friends, but several are empty. Four of the lamps are green. My lamp is also green. [...] I am alone in my kitchen cooking a meal when I receive a message. I barely look at the phone before I am back in the clinical white room with the glass walls again. One of the

seats is no longer empty. It is taken by one of the empty grey silhouettes without a face. He wants to contact me.

Exposure is an important aspect of Mathilde's experience, as is the potential onlooker. In this example, the unidentifiable Facebook profiles are staring at her through the glass walls. At the end of the text, a potential onlooker contacts her and becomes present in her inbox. This is a typical situation of harassment. Her text shows the difference between onlookers and harassers, it also shows how they are connected. As she said later, the fear of the potential onlooker is the "fear of the next assault". This requires us to consider different kinds of shame in relation to different aggressors. Wurmser (2015) differentiates between shame affect, shame anxiety and shame as a reaction formation. Using this terminology, potential onlookers cause shame anxiety because they make the potential fear of shame constant; while harassers cause shame affect because they are manifestations of the look. These two work together to cause shame as a reaction formation, which covers the things that victim-survivors do to avoid confrontation and the shame affect.

Mathilde's experience involves oscillating between shame anxiety in the potential presence of onlookers, and the shame affect when onlookers turn into harassers and become present. This balance is described by Bonnie Mann (2018), who distinguishes between ubiquitous shame (which is similar to Wurmser's shame as reaction formation), and unbounded shame, which she defines as "a thick, relentless, engulfing shame [...] that snuffs out any hope for redemption" (p. 403). Unbounded shame is engulfing because it is everywhere, and it is without redemption because it seems unlimited in time. It describes an important characteristic of DSA because digital media transgress space and time, and makes an assault as repeatable and as spreadable as the digital images are. Or as Amalie, Mathilde and Karen agree:

Mathilde: I feel like it's more than just one assault. I think it's an assault almost every time you are contacted and confronted with it.

Amalie: Yes, it just goes on.

Mathilde: Yes, it doesn't go away at all.

Karen: Mmm, not at all.

The three examples analysed here show how shame experiences vary depending on family relationships, sexuality and the rhythms of the assaults. Shame in these cases is still related to the look, and (as argued earlier) this exposure is an affordance of social media in the sense that the platforms (mostly Facebook) where the images spread all encourage sharing (Davis & Chouinard, 2016). In a similar sense, digital media grant the aggressors with anonymity, such as by using fake profiles. These affordances help to constitute the potential onlooker. Here, online and offline reality merge into an augmented reality (Jurgenson, 2012), with digital exposure, harassment etc. being entangled in offline shame anxiety and affect in a way that makes online and offline aspects inseparable. This means

that coping with DSA is intrinsically linked to negotiating the possibilities of this digitally augmented reality, as I will show in the following.

## Defying shame

If shame is a loop, as suggested by Scheff and Retzinger (1997), then defying it must be about breaking the loop. According to Scheff and Retzinger, this is possible only by acknowledging the shame. Here are five different ways in which Mathilde, Amalie and Karen tried to break the loop by negotiating and defying shame.

### 1: *Normalising youth culture*

"I tried to explain to my mother how normal it [taking intimate images] is", Mathilde says. "It's almost unusual not to do it". "That's it," Karen answers, "everybody does it". They often talked about how adults—from journalists and Facebook users to parents and relatives—would blame DSA victims for taking intimate or scantily dressed images. boyd (2014) describes this conflict:

In situations like this, teens are blamed for not thinking while adults assert the right to define the context in which young people interact. They take content out of context to interpret it through the lens of adults' values and feel as though they have the right to shame youth because that content was available in the first place. (p. 51)

boyd (2011) calls this context collapse, while Papacharissi (2011, 2015) talks about social saturation. Both refer to how digital media content that was produced for a specific context can easily be found, interpreted and sometimes misunderstood by outsiders. When Amalie, Karen and Mathilde assert that *it* is normal, or when Mathilde tries to explain this to her mother, they are insisting on interpreting the images in their original contexts where they are not shameful failures but everyday sexual practices in a digitally augmented reality. Defying shame then becomes a question of negotiating different values between generations when their contexts collapse.

### 2: *Negotiating understandings of DSA*

Normalisation was not the only way in which the participants tried to justify their position. Karen talks about her process of refusing shame:

It was also difficult for me to look myself in the eye at first, because I was thinking like, this is actually a bit wrong, and this and that. But it wasn't, because there were also a lot of the pictures and videos that he had taken when I didn't know about it. Mmm, and like, when I had said no and he had held my arms and all sorts of stuff.

Her struggle to look herself in the eye reflects an internalised sense of shame through the look. A shaming look that she ascribes to her parents. "They were like 'really, why did you

take those pictures?” she answers, when I asked how they reacted. To defend herself from their shaming, she explained to them that she did not take all of the pictures herself, and that some were produced non-consensually. In doing this, she contradicts the common discourse in which DSA victims are stereotyped as naïve and reckless. She emphasises that she does not fit this stereotype, and by refusing this position she undermines the basis for her parents’ shaming. However, Karen’s strategy of defying shame works because it plays out within a relationship and community in which she is invested and from which she is not entirely excluded (Ahmed, 2014; Probyn, 2005). She is not so much trying to create a counter discourse as trying to position herself in a way that is less shameful within the existing norms of the relationship. Therefore, by using this strategy, she also unintentionally undermines the normalisation argument by arguing in accordance with adult values so as to be acceptable to them. This was never a conflict between the participants because they supported each other in their different ways of coping, but it shows that not all coping strategies are equally inclusive—and perhaps they do not have to be.

### **3: Taking control**

Unlike Karen, Amalie hardly talked to her parents about the assault, and therefore she has other primary concerns when it comes to managing shame and exposure. One of these is related to retaining control of her digital identity. For example, she said that:

I spend a lot of time every time I go to bed on checking that I am not logged in anywhere, and I change my passwords all the time. So every time some little thing happens, like the other day my Apple ID logged out by itself, so my phone logged out by itself, and I don’t know why, I still don’t know why, but I could see that I was not logged in anywhere else, and I have step verification on everything so it is not like anybody can just get in. It was probably nothing, but I was up all night until half past six the day before I had an exam, and I hadn’t slept and just been really, changed all my passwords and stuff, I really can’t, if something happens it just releases a long series of things that I have to do to fix it, so it is really fucking annoying. I have also had like, after the last time somebody contacted me, there was a long time where I had my Facebook deactivated and I only logged in to check things. Now I have switched to deactivating it every night when I sleep so I don’t get any messages at night and wake up to see them.

This can be seen as an example of shame as reaction formation (Wurmser, 2015). Like the former example, in which Amalie talked about sexual objectification, she is concerned with managing her identity. She tries to do this by using the Facebook deactivate function to opt in and out of digital reality, and by creating routines connected to data safety (Pink, Lanzeni, & Horst, 2018). Despite this effort, Amalie is still aware that she cannot control her digital presence because the DSA images keep circulating. This kind of confrontation with the boundaries of one’s freedom is what Amanda Lagerkvist (2017) calls a limit situation. When confronted with the limits of her digital freedom, Amalie realises

her *thrownness* in a digital world with certain boundaries that she cannot change and certain freedoms she does not have.

For Lagerkvist, this uncontrollability is what makes digital reality existential; however, for Larsen (2016), it is what makes it valuable. She argues that digital identities have value because they reveal social status through co-constructed elements. Amalie is trying to limit the assault by strictly limiting her social media presence, but she also expresses frustration about not having equal access to a digital social and professional life. She exclaimed that: “You can’t write where you work [on FB], you can’t have a LinkedIn profile, you can’t do anything!” In other words, this kind of shame as reaction formation that limits social media possibilities might minimise the exposure, but it also allows the assault to impose other negative consequences because it forces her to keep her online and offline lives separate and thus disconnects her from the digitally augmented reality of others.

#### **4: Coming out of hiding**

Another type of shame as reaction formation revolves around avoiding confrontation by not going out, skipping social events, avoiding connections with new people etc.. Scheff and Retzinger (1997) also find that this a common reaction to unacknowledged shame in women. “The past year, every time I’ve had to go shopping, I walk and look down at the ground, always. I haven’t dared to get eye contact with anyone, and if there is a guy who smiles at me, I panic,” Mathilde recounts. But she also talked about how to overcome these fears and limitations. In this text, she imagines such a situation through creative writing:

The sun has come out early this year. The winter coats have been packed away at the back of the closet. She can no longer hide behind dark coats and scarfs. The folds of the green flowered dress are dancing in the light wind. The determined steps of the high heels are echoing between the tall old buildings. Her back is straight and her eyes a little distant. The city is vibrant. Young men and women with red and blue hats [high-school graduates]. They are happy. When she sees a group of young men all wearing red hats, she straightens up, more than seems possible, while passing them. She looks ahead. Cool, with a rigid glance.

The text shows that Mathilde, when acknowledging (Scheff & Retzinger, 1997) and defying her shame anxiety (Wurmser, 2015), sees the possibility of a future beyond unbounded shame (Mann, 2018). The potential onlooker is still present in the text—embodied by the young male graduates—but it no longer has the power it once had. In contrast to Amalie’s example, Mathilde’s story embraces the presence of the digital world in her offline life and overcomes the fear of exposure rather than accepting the limitations of avoiding it.

### 5: *Imaginary progressive contra-shaming*

In the last workshop, we talked about how things had changed and improved over the past year while we had been working together. Mathilde and Amalie shared stories of recent situations that had made them realise that they were getting better. Eager to produce some sort of empirical evidence of empowerment in the group, I encouraged these stories—not thinking about the fact that in my position as a researcher, I could paradoxically be forcing ideas of empowerment onto the participants—at least, until Mathilde reluctantly said: “Yes, but it isn’t easy”. She went on to give a specific example of her coping process:

Mathilde: Not too long ago when [...] I was walking down to the local supermarket to do some shopping, I had eye contact with the guy who I thought shared my images, and I haven’t seen him for years. And then he gives me this crooked smile and laughs a little, and then he just walks on.

Signe: So, what did you do?

Mathilde: I didn’t do anything. I didn’t really feel anything. At the time I thought ‘fuck, I will get an anxiety attack now’, I was prepared for my body to react, but it didn’t. Nothing at all. I just walked in and did my shopping and then I went to my mom’s place. I was just really surprised that—he has given me anxiety attacks before if I have seen him around that has triggered it—there was nothing.

[...]

Mathilde: Even though you are not supposed to take pleasure in that kind of thing, I feel a bit pleased that he has gotten a little fat.

Signe: Fair enough

Mathilde: He was not as good looking as he used to be. He played a lot on how attractive he was back when I was seeing him. He can’t do that anymore.

Amalie: \*laughs

Mathilde: He is still good looking, but I don’t think he thinks so.

This story also has an aspect of managing to overcome shame anxiety. However, the way that Mathilde does it here is different. Instead of ignoring the potential aggressor, she actively looks back at him, objectifying his body and imagining that her look makes him feel ashamed. This can be described as a kind of contra-shaming, but it is important to remember that this is an imaginary form of shaming. Mathilde does not actually confront the potential aggressor—potential because she is not sure that he is responsible—but she imagines him feeling ashamed under her look, and it helps her defy her own shame.

This kind of imagined contra-shaming is particularly interesting in relation to digital assault because the onlookers in these cases are often undefined or unapproachable. “I look down on the guys who do that sort of thing,” Mathilde says when talking about looking back at aggressors that are not embodied or identified but who represent an abstract idea of who the aggressors are. “Before I was afraid of them, now I just think they are really low persons”. Imaginary contra-shaming in these examples makes it possible to

respond to potential aggressors because it does not require a specific well-defined other to be the target. When the look is imagined, the construct of the aggressor can be so too.

Both Amalie and Karen have similar accounts of looking down at aggressors, but Mathilde's story is particularly interesting because this kind of contra-shaming was not available to her when the workshops started. Contra-shaming became an option following interactions with the group, acknowledging her feelings of shame, and gaining an understanding of the discriminative structures behind the assault.

### The progressive in imaginary contra-shaming

As revealed earlier, it was important for Mathilde, Amalie and Karen to find ways to live without shame; but they also cared about political and social justice for DSA victims in general. Amalie is engaged in grassroots activism, Karen was fighting her case in court and has been present in the news media, and Mathilde does work to support other victims. This engagement was important for Amalie in particular. When reflecting on her anger after the assault, she said:

You think you are part of a society that will take action when you experience something unfair, but that is not the case at all [...] It made me so angry, it really isn't good enough and it must be possible to do something. So, I got involved in different things because I was angry, and that has been empowering, this feeling of being able to do something [...] I am not ashamed in the same way as I was at first, but still, it is just in a different way, I think.

Imaginary contra-shaming became a part of *being able to do something* because it was a way of rebelling against the dominant discourse that positions DSA victims as shameful individuals. Instead, contra-shaming seeks to direct the shaming look at the aggressors. This resonates with Probyn's description of positive shame (2005, 2019) as that which shames those who unrightfully shame others, with Ahmed's claim (2014) that positive shame is that which encourages resistance against exclusive behaviour; and to some extent with Bissenbakker's claim (2012, 2013) that progressive strategies can use shame to examine and expose the systems that shame some individuals before others. When Amalie, Karen and Mathilde practise contra-shaming and defend themselves from shame in the communities that they are part of, they participate in renegotiating their own position and that of other DSA victims within these communities. By imagining the aggressors being ashamed, they indirectly criticise a structure in which shame is attached to their sexuality rather than to the assaulting acts of the aggressors.

This circulation of shame between victims and aggressors can be understood through what Kofoed and Ringrose (2012) call travelling and sticky affects. They describe situations of cyberbullying as assemblages of bodies and technologies in which affects circulate and temporarily stick. Like Bissenbakker and Ahmed, Kofoed and Ringrose show that some affects stick particularly well to certain bodies because discursive power formations sup-

port this attachment. Based on this understanding, I will argue that imaginary, progressive contra-shaming causes and is caused by a renegotiation of the discursive attachment of shame to victim-survivors. This negotiation instead allows shame to circulate and also land on the aggressors. This does not just have a personal value as part of a complex set of coping strategies but it also has political potential because by openly defying shame, Mathilde, Amalie and Karen encourage the people around them to rethink the discursive affective system surrounding DSA and the attachment of shame to sexuality. This constant circulation is not only part of the unboundedness (Mann, 2018) of shame but it also breaks it by imagining a future in which redemption becomes possible because aggressors are shamed before victims.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on Mathilde, Amalie and Karen, and the ways in which they live with DSA. My aim was to offer insights into their perspectives as victim-survivors, and to describe a research process that not only helped them communicate their experiences but which has also shaped their ways of thinking and acting in relation to the assaults. As mentioned in the introduction, this is a relevant contribution to a field in which the in-depth, nuanced perspectives of victim-survivors are rarely represented.

There are two kinds of concluding remarks to be made here: the first relates to knowledge about how digital media shape shame experiences of DSA; while the second relates to the process of exploring and defining these experiences, which generates new perspectives. In other words, how giving voice is not just about “call[ing] forth a voice that is held in silence” (Gilligan, 2014, p. 104), but about taking part in (co-)constructing voices that did not necessarily exist before somebody asked to hear them.

The article has presented two typologies: one for different kinds of assault based on levels of consent; and one for different kinds of aggressors based on their relation to the victims. One kind of aggressor in particular—the onlooker—was central in the analysis, which showed how shame in relation to DSA is often connected to the look. This article has brought Sartre’s concept of the look into the digital arena and connected it to the spreadability, anonymity and endless audiences that social media make possible.

Furthermore, I showed the different ways in which Karen, Amalie and Mathilde sought to defy shame through avoiding, negotiating and standing up to the onlooker and the norms behind their shaming. Out of five documented coping strategies, one in particular—imaginary, progressive contra-shaming—seemed to have empowering potentials. With this strategy, the participants turned the shaming look around and directed it at the aggressors. I have argued that this kind of contra-shaming has political and personal potential because it helps the participants to cope with feelings of shame, fear and exposure; and because by turning shame around, it seeks to establish a new discursive order in which shame in digital sexual assault is moved from the victims to the aggressors. Or

in Mathilde's words: "I know now that it's not my fault, I'm not the problem, I am not the one who is flawed".

Karen, Mathilde and Amalie have read and approved this article. When reading the first draft, Mathilde e-mailed me giving her thoughts. "It is impressive how much you can get out of so little", she commented. She meant this in a positive way, but it also implies that there is a lot more to be said. Owing to the workshop format, the discussions developed around experiences that the participants shared, such as the feeling of shame and exposure. These shared perspectives are the focus here, but in future it may be interesting to open up to more diverse voices and the potential conflicts between them.

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