Navigating the Tensions of Normative Masculinity: Homosocial Dynamics in Australian Young Men's Discussions of Sexting Practices

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Abstract

Building on research identifying sexting as an important aspect of contemporary youth cultures, this article critically explores the ways that homosocial bonding is bound up with, and produced in the context of, young adult men's discussions of sexting. Drawing on a focus-group study with 37 undergraduate young men based in Melbourne, Australia, we find both deviations from and continuations with the literature that has emphasised men's homosocial bonding as being predicated on women's sexualisation and subordination. Discussions of sexting prove to be a site where young men navigate being 'lads' prioritising homosocial relations over relations with female partners and objectifying women to demonstrate masculine status, while simultaneously wanting to be respectful men who call out bad behaviour and emphasise trust and mutuality in their relations with women. We make sense of this by drawing on the concepts of 'horizontal' and 'vertical' homosociality, and by attending to the symbolic boundary work that the young men undertake. In our concluding discussion, we consider the potentially productive, disciplinary role of – and limits to – digital technologies in regulating the production and performance of young masculinities that still rely on the articulation of hierarchies that legitimate gender inequality, even when young men espouse progressive views.

Introduction

The lives of contemporary young people are bound up with and facilitated by developments in digital technologies, and it is widely accepted that 'mobile phones, social media and the internet play a central role in [youth] leisure, pedagogy and work practices' (Salter et al., 2013: 302). Technological developments have also influenced the production and practice of young people's intimate lives, with digital spaces understood as being sites of 'exploration, expression and experimentation' in this regard (Dobson et al., 2018). Relatedly, sexting, defined as the 'creation and sharing of sexual images or text messages via mobile phones or internet applications' (Hasinoff, 2014: 449), is one such development held as an important aspect of contemporary youth cultures (Ravn et al., 2019; Roberts and Ravn, 2020; Setty 2019).

Sexting is something in which young men and young women engage almost equally (Madigan et al., 2018). Yet, much research has uncovered the experience of sexting as being highly gendered. The broader discourses focused on the risks young people face when engaging in sexting often emphasise (especially under-aged) girls' lack of vigilance in their uses of social media (Hasinoff, 2014), and position boys and young men as predatory and over-sexed (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015). This dichotomous media discourse, characterised by discussions of at-risk young women versus 'risky' young men, is troubled by various academic studies (e.g. Albury et al., 2013; Dobson, 2017; Setty, 2019), but research repeatedly points to a gendered 'double standard' at the level of sexting experience (e.g.

Albury et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2013; Salter et al., 2013). This means that girls and young women are expected to partake in sexting to the same extent as men but are simultaneously held to other standards, judged and often subjected to 'slut shaming', leading researchers to contend that sexting circulates and perpetuates gender inequality (e.g. Salter, 2016).

Men's sexting and associated behaviours are considered in the literature as distinctly homosocial practices. The extant research has tended towards a focus on, using Hammarén and Johansson's (2014) terminology, the vertical components of homosocial practice tied up with retaining hegemony and 'profiting' from the exchange between boys/men of intimate images or stories acquired from women/girls. This is distinct from horizontal homosocial practices, which denotes authentic connection derived through emotional closeness, intimacy, and a non-profitable form of friendship.

For boys and young men, then, sexting is observed to facilitate the building of masculine social capital through sharing images solicited from women. Research often finds this to be a demanded element of achieving compulsory masculine heterosexuality; not to abide by the conventions of rating and sharing images of women is to risk homophobic taunts and social isolation (Ringrose et al., 2012; Salter, 2016). Such research predominantly focuses on younger teenagers. One exception in this regard is Burkett's (2015) detailed exploration of sexting cultures among male and female 18–25-year-old young adults, which points to a more complicated picture where men equally often reject rather than endorse using sexts of women as a form of currency (see also Ravn et al., 2019). As well as 'disrupting dominant gendered sexting narratives', Burkett's work also signals the need 'to explore the influence of cultural sexualisation and contemporary forms of hetero-masculinity on everyday young men's own negotiations and performances of hetero-masculinity, particularly through the use of social media and digital communications' (Burkett, 2015: 860). The present article contributes to this call by paying particular attention to the homosocial aspects of young adult male friendship groups' discussions of their sexting practices.

Drawing on a focus-group study of 37 undergraduate young men based in Melbourne, Australia, we critically explore how the participants balance the need to abide by masculine norms to perform an acceptable masculine identity while also demonstrating other and more inclusive practices (towards each other as well as towards women). We situate this analysis in the context of studies of men's homosocial behaviours and the associated interest in 'critical analysis of the sexual cultures of heterosexual men' (Flood, 2008: 340), thus we are interested in performances and negotiations of masculinity in relation to sexting, and how these speak to recent scholarship on masculinity and social change. Our findings highlight considerable complexity, identifying both deviations from and continuations with the literature that has mostly emphasised the potential for men's homosocial bonding to be predicated on women's sexualisation and subordination. In our concluding discussion, we explore how the contemporary context of digitally underpinned sociality shapes this type of practice.

Masculinity and Homosocial Bonding

Recent scholarship from the Global North on homosociality – the platonic social relations and bonds between people of the same sex – has largely (though not exclusively) been bent towards discussions of men and masculinity (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014). A primary feature of this work has been an emphasis on the methods and means by which men, through their homosocial behaviours, collectively (re)produce patriarchal relations (Flood, 2008; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). This includes (re)situating homophobia as central to masculinity (Kimmel, 1994), efforts to erase the prospect of homoerotic desire (Flood, 2008; Sedgwick, 1985), seeking approval from other men for displays of non-femaleness (Johnson, 1988) and competing with one another to improve masculine standing (Flood, 2008). Men's homosocial groups are, in this formulation, arenas where men 'watch, rank and gate-keep' in respect of validating and permitting other men 'into the realm of manhood' (Kimmel, 1994: 124), and sites where men police other men's behaviour to ensure it abides by and upholds masculine norms (Pascoe, 2007). In many ways this reflects West and Zimmerman's famous contention that 'doing' gender is an 'emergent feature of social situations' (1987: 126), where 'the virtual or real presence of others' (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 126) holds individuals accountable for their gender performance.

Moreover, core to the masculinities literature is an overriding argument that homosociality is tightly bound up with and an extension of 'hegemonic masculinity', the historically mobile pattern of practice characterised by men's collective interest in maintaining patriarchal gender relations (Connell, 1995). Men's homosocial relations are particularly crucial to the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity, because it is in these spaces that, through the sexual objectification of women, maleness is established as 'not only as different from female but as better than female' (Bird, 1996: 121, emphasis in original).

Discussions about and relations to women are theorised as cementing bonds between men (Sedgewick, 1985) and, according to Flood (2008), men's homosocial bonds in turn shape their sexual relations with women. Operating as an 'absent-presence', men's discursive positioning of 'woman' plays a pivotal role in how men demonstrate and attain masculine status and reproduce a hierarchical gender order (Connell, 1995; Flood, 2008). Processes of othering are often central to these interactions. In particular, sexual and sexist jokes are said to 'play a prominent role in establishing male heterosexual identity and facilitating male group bonding' (Thurnell-Read, 2012: 251). Indeed, from Willis' (1977) lads, Collinson's (1988) shop-floor workers, Kehily and Nayak's (1997) focus on schoolboys, through to Bunn et al.'s (2016) football fans, a long lineage of research has situated humour as constitutive of masculinity.

However, this dynamic extends beyond jokes. Men bond through a culture of watching women – 'whereby the gaze of male sexual desire is used to actively display heterosexual masculinity for the benefit of a complicit male audience' (Thurnell-Read, 2012: 252). This process of heterosexual achievement is evidenced also through 'picking up' women – that is, collectively engaging in the pursuit of casual sex and bonding through the exchange of stories

of efforts at 'hooking up' as a form of masculine currency (Kalish and Kimmel, 2011). Further, in this formulation, women's approval of men is deemed irrelevant; in fact, women's disapproval is said to strengthen, rather than threaten, a man's sense of masculinity. This constellation of behaviours can mean that certain homosocial environments can be conducive to aggression towards women and, in some cases, heinous acts of sexual violence (Flood, 2008).

Changing Homosocial Dynamics?

Over the last 10 to 15 years, a burgeoning literature has emerged, documenting a shift in men's homosocial interactions, and pointing towards changed norms and practices. Much of this work draws on Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory (IMT). Predicated on empirical research with men in university fraternities, and later various sporting settings, Anderson (2009: 97) postulates that declining cultural homophobia and homohysteria (the fear of being perceived as gay) means boys and young men are freer than ever 'to express emotional intimacy and physical expressions of that relationship with one another'. A voluminous research literature has followed, highlighting the increased openness and affection among friends and greater acceptance of sexual difference among schoolboys (e.g. McCormack, 2012), undergraduate young men (Robinson et al., 2017), YouTube gamers (Maloney et al., 2018) men who have long left educational settings (Magrath and Scoats, 2019), and even elderly men (Anderson and Fidler, 2018).

A particularly relevant IMT-inspired article is Robinson et al.'s (2017) critical interrogation of the notion of the 'bromance'. More than a symbolic act of male closeness or heterosexual boundary blurring, the definition derived from the data in Robinson et al.'s (2017: 7) research signals that the bromance is 'an intimate same-sex male friendship based on unrivalled trust and self-disclosure that superseded other friendships'. Core tenets of such relationships include having 'the liberty to express fear, weakness, uncertainty, or affection for other men' (Robinson et al., 2017: 4), all of which were depicted as being impossible for heterosexual young men in the 1980s and 1990s (Plummer, 1999). Robinson et al.'s (2017) research is one of the few IMT-inspired pieces that discuss men's attitudes towards women. While only a small part of the study, these authors point to a 'privileging' of homosocial 'bromantic' relations at the expense of heterosexual romantic relations. Nonetheless, it seems clear that, as with other IMT literature, men have 'come to esteem a more advanced and complex level of emotionality in their same-sex friendships' (Robinson et al., 2017: 16). From a different theoretical standpoint, Karioris's (2019) ethnographic account of a US men's university residential campus adds to this literature, interrogating and challenging simplistic and reductive accounts of homosocial bonds as only – or even mainly – a vehicle for dominance over women or other men (see also Ralph and Roberts, 2020).

Attending more overtly to conceptual terrain, Hammarén and Johansson (2014: 7) argue from a post-structuralist position that researchers need to develop a more dynamic view on homosocial relations and 'remain open to the possibility of discovering potential movements toward a redefined hegemony'. They propose that researchers must always attend to vertical

as well as horizontal homosocial practices. Simply put, the former pertains to efforts geared towards 'strengthening power and of creating close homosocial bonds to maintain and defend hegemony', while the latter resists and rejects hierarchy through 'relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship' (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014: 5). This distinction is important, and, in unison with the conceptual affordances offered by hegemonic masculinity and IMT, permits us to analyse discretely different components of homosociality as it pertains to men's discussions of their sexting practices.

Methods and Data

This article draws on data from a research project on young men's experiences and understandings of sexting. Using a qualitative research design, we conducted 10 focus groups with a total of 37 male undergraduates from diverse fields of study – across the Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences – at two universities in Melbourne, Australia. Participants were recruited via flyers distributed on campus and they were asked to gather a group of friends to the focus-group interviews. Conducting focus groups with groups of friends can be productive when investigating potentially sensitive topics; it also helps the researcher tap into shared understandings and social norms in these groups (Halkier, 2017). Men's friendship groups are a particularly useful arena for observing how masculinities are constructed, negotiated and perpetuated over time and for exploring social change and continuity. As Allen argues, men's signification of their sexual practices and sexual identities 'within a research situation may offer insights about how masculinities are constituted elsewhere' (Allen, 2005: 36).

The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years. The majority of the participants identified as heterosexual, with two men in one focus group identifying as gay. With this low number of non-heterosexual participants, and because they were limited to one group, we are not able to draw any meaningful conclusions about how sexting looks beyond the overwhelmingly heterosexual majority of our sample. Additionally, as we noted earlier, in this article we have followed the lead of Burkett (2015) and Flood (2008), among others, in specifically attending to hetero-masculinity.

Most of the sample identified as White Australian, though five were international students from the USA, China, Ireland and England. The international students were spread out across the focus groups and we did not note any cultural differences; in the analysis we include only one example of this. However, attending to cultural differences was not a specific part of the research design therefore not something we can draw conclusions on based on the data at hand.

The focus groups were moderated by the first (male) author, and averaged 1 hour 35 minutes in length. The focus-group schedule covered six broad themes including: definitions of and experiences with sexting; the relationship between sex and sexting; perceived norms for sharing sexts with third parties; perceived gender differences; and media representations of

risks related to sexting. Examples of discussion questions include: 'What do you understand by this term [sexting]?' 'Where is the boundary between what you show and don't show to friends?' 'What is your impression of sexting? Is it fun, difficult etc.'. We also asked about changes in the participants' own practices and what might explain these differences as well as about the group members' relations to each other more generally. Here, we explored what they would talk about and share with each other and, for example, how that contrasted with what they would discuss and share with other groups of friends or acquaintances. For the theme on definitions of sexting we used a set of visual stimulus material in the form of images of mobile screenshot 'sexting conversations', sourced from an internet search. The images were chosen to fit a rough typology as 'aggressive', 'comedic' or 'ambiguous', and participants were asked to discuss these in terms of what they perceived of as sexting and what they did not. This led to discussions of sexting versus harassment and how to distinguish the two. This part of the data is not a focus of the analysis in this article, but reported at length elsewhere (Ravn et al., 2019.).

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants' names and other identifying characteristics such as programme of study have been anonymised. As in all focus-group research, there were limits to the confidence that could be guaranteed, but we communicated conventional ethical guidelines for social science research, ensured written consent and emphasised the need to respect others' need for confidence beyond the room. Participants received a $30 retail voucher for their time. Monash University granted the study ethical approval (CF16/1398-2016000763).

In this article we focus specifically on performances and negotiations of masculinity in the material at hand. Elsewhere we have analysed sexting as a social practice (Roberts and Ravn, 2020), including what is seen as 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' sexting, and the gendered notions of risk and value as this appeared in the data (Ravn et al., 2019). For the analysis in this article then, the first two authors coded the interview transcripts based on three broad codes: interactions and norms between friends, interactions with sexting 'partners' (women) and reflections on one's own practice. Reading these codes, differences in discussions about the men-to-men interactions and the men-to-women interactions became visible. To conceptualise this we turned to the theoretical debates and found the distinction between horizontal and vertical masculinity helpful for analysing these codes. This led us (the first three authors) to develop a number of sub-codes, firstly relating to 'competitive' relations, 'inclusive' relations, and the uses of humour in men-to-men relations. Secondly, for the code on men-to-women relations we developed sub-codes for interactions with girlfriends and 'one-night stands'. The last code on self-reflection led us to draw on the concept of 'symbolic boundary work' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) to make sense of the moral distinctions made between older and younger selves, as well as between their own practices and those of 'others'. As Lamont and Molnár write, symbolic boundaries are 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorise objects, people, practices, and even time and space' (2002: 168). Such distinctions are not neutral, but often ordered hierarchically, thereby creating a 'hierarchy of moral worth' (Small et al., 2010: 17).

While focus groups excel at generating data on negotiations and perceptions, they are not ideal for understanding individual motivations, for instance for engaging in sexting practices. This means that we are not able to draw conclusions about how each participant's individual experiences and biography relate to their current sexting practices. In that sense, we view our material as best suited to investigating how groups of friends – with pre-established dynamics, intimacy and rapport – negotiate the normative understandings of sexting; in other words, our data concerns what is seen as legitimate and illegitimate sexting practices amongst these groups of friends. That means that both the 'what' (the substantive content) and the 'how' (the interaction between participants) of the interview are part of the findings (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). This is in line with Atkinson and Coffey's (2002) critique of distinctions between 'what people say and what people do'. The focus-group interviews are performances, but so are performances in everyday life, although not observed by the researcher. That said, the fact that we were interviewing groups of friends with at least some intimate knowledge of each other's romantic experiences meant that participants sometimes called each other out if someone was presenting themselves in a too favourable light, in that sense intervening in the self-presentations taking place in front of the moderator.

As with all qualitative research, our aim is not to create generalisable findings from a focus-group study. However, given that participants in the focus groups draw on broader cultural discourses and understandings to formulate intelligible arguments in the group setting, we can assume that the findings have some resonance beyond the particular groups in question. This approach is underpinned by Lamont and Molnár's (2002: 171) theorising that the symbolic boundaries that are negotiated in a given social context are shaped 'particularly by the cultural repertoires, traditions and narratives that individuals have access to'.

Analysis

Emphasising the centrality of homosocial dynamics to (male) youth sexting culture, large parts of the focus-group discussions revolved around what aspects of this practice participants would share with their peers, when they would do so and why. Here, we explore how this is part of performing a normative identity as a heterosexual man. Keeping in mind the conceptual discussion above, we analyse how performances of traditional, hegemonic masculinity appear alongside performances of more inclusive masculinity, inclusive with regard to other men as well as women. We also analyse how they navigate and balance these different expectations and briefly consider these performances in the context of the focus-group setting and in relation to the moderator.

Proving Masculinity Amongst Peers

In the sample, flirting, sex and women were generally described as 'one of the most commonly talked about things' in men-to-men relations. These conversations were part of an important validation occurring between men, mirroring conventional accounts of homosociality that emphasise how such behaviours erase the prospect of homoerotic desire (Flood, 2008; Sedgwick, 1985) and that ensures men can 'watch, rank and gate-keep' in respect of validating and permit other men 'into the realm of manhood' (Kimmel, 1994: 124).

The following extract from a focus group evidences this key trend of vertical homosociality in the data:

> Warren:
> In a weird sort of way. I don't really know how to word it . . . there's a lot more weird sort of collectivism in proving that you're getting this sort of sexual . . .
>
> Guy:
> And [a sexting image] also becomes a visual representation of your sexual success right? Like, 'this is all me boys . . .'
>
> Warren:
> Like, being able to have sex with people is like, the ultimate validation of your social status . . . that's a way of conveying that you're reasonably socially valuable, even outside of the group. So it's a weird kind of way of like, double checking that you have social value. And it's kind of cynical being like, oh you always have to prove yourself, but . . .
>
> Guy:
> No man, people are competitive animals. They're always jostling for like a hierarchy with other people, and I definitely think that guys would use it as a thing like, 'look at this, I have proof that I can interact with females and be sexually successful and my genetic lineage isn't a complete fuckup, right? I can do these sorts of things' . . .
>
> Warren:
> I think there's a certain point where you'd get taken down a notch if you showed stuff that was obviously meant to be private. At least within my group from where I'm from originally, because we're so close, if you went too far, someone would tell you. Like if you showed stuff that was clearly meant to be private, you'd be checked on it straight away I feel.
>
> Guy:
> One hundred percent, I mean, socially you can distinguish between people bragging, and to some degree showing their mates and trying to affirm their mastery of their sexual environment.

As Warren here describes, men's social value, or social status, is closely linked to their sexual value. In other words, a man's ability to 'interact' with women, be seen as attractive, pick up women and have sex is way of 'proving yourself' as a proper man–a man with status in the peer group. And conversely, the opposite situation where a man is not able to prove this will detract from his status in the peer group, which Guy describes as a 'competitive' environment. Indeed in another group, Kurt stated: 'If you say you haven't got with a girl in eight weeks, particularly in college, it's not like you'll get bullied for it, but you'll get ripped by guys, like, "what happened?" It's definitely one of the key talking points.' While Warren, who is an international student, refers to 'where he is from originally', this is not used to make a point about cultural differences, but rather seems to refer to the closeness of the group of friends.

We will return to Warren's point about intervening if friends go too far, but noteworthy here is that 'misbehaving' also detracts from one's social status in the peer group. Here, then, the rules of appropriate manliness remain tied to notions of hierarchy, competition, rank and

prestige, but how this is legitimated is somewhat different to traditional accounts in the masculinities literature. As such, 'bragging' and 'oversharing' – for instance by showing a picture that was not meant to be shared – or in other ways exaggerating your performance is deemed not legitimate and counterproductive to proving one's masculinity. Yet, sharing 'enough' information is both acceptable and important, as the following extract shows:

> Quinn:
> When you're single and you hook up with someone, it's like, 'oh what happened?!'
>
> Neil:
> Yeah it's new and it's fresh.
>
> Quinn:
> Yeah it's like, 'oh what was she like?' But even then, I wouldn't describe it.
>
> Charlie:
> Yeah, you wouldn't go into details.
>
> Quinn:
> If they're willing to give it, then yeah, it's cool, but I wouldn't push for it.
>
> Leo:
> I'd say also that's one of the things between mates. The general expectation of disclosure would be, if you're in a relationship with someone, you're generally going to assume, unless stated otherwise, that you're probably sexually active. So you're not going to say to your mates, 'oh yeah we did it last night.'
>
> Neil:
> [sarcastically] 'Yeah guys, high fives all round!'
>
> Leo:
> Whereas, if we're all kind of single and then you do go home with someone, you do kind of say, in this period of disclosure, this thing happened last night. But even then, we'd never really get that graphic, because it's not really kosher.

According to the discussion here, if a man is in a relationship it is assumed that he is sexually active and this appears to be sufficient to validate his masculinity. However, for men who are single, their sexual prowess cannot be taken for granted and 'you do kind of say . . . that this thing happened last night' to ensure your 'mates' know. This disclosure, however, is not a full disclosure. What is important is, first, that a man's friends know that he is sexually active and second, as Matt says in another group, that 'you want to portray yourself to your mates as the kind of person that scores a good-looking chick'. Hence, the more attractive the woman in question is, the better for one's status in the peer group. This begs the question, though, about what kinds of information can legitimately be shared. As mentioned earlier, there is a fine line between sharing and oversharing, and going 'into details' or being 'graphic' is generally not seen as appropriate. Being able to navigate this 'fine line' and give just the right amount of details is crucial for the men's standing in their peer group. Later in the article, we explore

further what content is seen to be 'shareable' and what is not and go further into how the men in our study balance this.

Another key element of homosocial masculinity that we observed in the focus groups relates to the use of humour. The literature is unambiguous about humour being a culturally approved form of male engagement (Baxter, 2002). Many researchers emphasise men's reliance on othering through homophobic and sexist discourses (see Flood 2008; Kehily and Nayak, 1997), while others centre on the ironic playing up of romantic relations between straight male peers, which enhance homosocial bonding at the same time as it recuperates men's heterosexuality (e.g. McCormack, 2012; Maloney et al., 2018). In both cases, just as in our study, the performance of and receptiveness to humour functions to showcase and (re)assert some traditional orthodox masculine norms.

The men in our study sometimes deployed humour to make light of what was an otherwise serious discussion, a theme found in other research as well (see e.g. Chapple and Ziebland, 2004 on men joking about their own ill health). For instance, Liam, talking about the prospect of receiving an unsolicited image of a woman's vulva, joked 'I'd be pretty worried that my phone had chlamydia if someone was ready to send that . . .'. Discussing how one might react to being told by a sexting recipient that a message was seen as transgressive or offensive, another group resorted to humour after initially answering more seriously:

> Leon:
> You'd be empathetic for sure. You'd be like, 'I'm so sorry, I thought this was where we were going.'
>
> Jim:
> And then you'd probably go into a pitfall and never talk to that person ever again.
>
> Simon:
> Lock yourself away for the rest of the week.
>
> Leon:
> Chuck Coldplay1 on [laughter from all].

Self-deprecation, especially in relation to their own bodies, also often punctuated discussions. Yet, these partially comedic references in relation to images of men's (indeed, their own) penises allowed the participants to play down the seriousness of someone sharing an image of them without consent.2 Such comments resonate with the idea that 'humorous exchanges are constitutive of heterosexual masculine identities' (Kehily and Nayak, 1997: 69), and speaks to a long-standing idea in the literature that 'only real men can laugh at themselves' (Collinson, 1988: 185), or that it signals being a 'normal' man (Coates, 2003). Nonetheless, through these moments of comedic relief, the young men both defused and more safely engaged with some of the more serious, even 'dark' content. In this sense, the humour also had a productive function, being part of the 'nonprofitable form of friendship' (Hammarén and Johansson, 2014: 5) that acts as a pretext for mutual trust and masculine gestures of emotional support.

Being a Respectful, Modern Man

While proving that masculinity is central to the men's standing amongst other men, this is not without bounds. On the contrary, this has to be balanced against their relation to women, both actual female partners but also their attitude to women in general in order to come across as a respectful, 'modern man'. Here, then, we find another break from the literature that theorises the denigration, or sexual objectification of women as being central to cementing bonds between men (Flood, 2008; Sedgewick, 1985). This is clear in this extract from a group discussion:

> Moderator:
> Have you ever had other guys showing you images of women or texts or whatever? And what do you think of that kind of stuff?
>
> Neil:
> Yeah.
>
> Quinn:
> Yeah. I don't dig it, it makes me feel uncomfortable.
>
> Leo:
> I don't really know about that either.
>
> Quinn:
> It's really disrespectful.
>
> Leo:
> Yeah it's disrespectful. Kind of like a broken mutual trust.
>
> Moderator:
> Any lines that are acceptable? Say it's a mate that you know well, and they show you a picture of something strange or funny?
>
> Neil:
> I think if they were doing it because they needed advice? Like, 'dude this girl showed me this photo, I don't know what she wants? I don't really know how to deal with it.' that's different from, 'look at this stupid slut, look what she sent me.' I have experienced it before, and it makes me really uncomfortable.
>
> Moderator:
> What about what if it's not, 'look at this stupid slut?' What if it's, 'look at this beautiful woman,' and it's a topless photo for example?
>
> Charlie:
> I still would be against that sort of thing. I still think that, presumably if they [the women] wanted me to see that photo they would have sent it to me I guess. I don't think it should be at the decision of the receiver to decide . . .
>
> Quinn:

> Yeah, especially when there are public outlets to post photos. So easily. Through your Snapchat story, your Instagram, your Facebook . . . and then there's private places. If you're sending it privately it's like you've exclusively made that intention pretty clear. This is for you.

In this account, and in other focus groups, the men speak to potential situations where sharing a sext with friends is acceptable – such as when needing advice from peers. This aligns more with Hammarén and Johansson's (2014) notion of horizontal homosociality, where men act in ways to support one another and develop relations based on closeness; it also reflects Anderson's (2009) claims that enhanced intimacy between men is nowadays realisable. Indeed, in another group, Guy exemplified this by recounting that what he discusses with his best friend in relation to sex included insecurities about his sexual performance. Meanwhile, also in the context of insecurities, there were multiple discussions of how trusting relations among close friends permitted sharing (especially written) sexts that one had sent or planned to send to a romantic interlocutor. These perhaps simultaneously legitimate one's sexual prowess but also evidence one's vulnerability and lack of sexting mastery, alluding to the 'unrivalled trust and self-disclosure' that is central to (some) modern homosocial friendships (Robinson et al., 2017).

Moreover, the men in this study, as shown in the previous long extract, also generally (retrospectively) condemn non-consensually shared sexts as well as of the derogatory language that sometimes accompanies this practice. Key to these men's concerns about showing sexts to others are notions of respect and trust. In their view, sexts that are sent 'privately' are 'for you' only and are not to be shared. As we argue elsewhere (Roberts and Ravn, 2020), this emphasis on trust as a key element in sexting practices is common throughout the focus groups. It is also clear, however, that the participants know of other men who do non-consensually show or share sexts; we explore this topic later. As we emphasise in the last section of this analysis, there is also a performative layer to the discussions here, with the participants drawing moral boundaries to position themselves as 'proper' men, in contrast to those 'others' who would willingly share sexts received 'privately' (cf. Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Turning in more detail to the notion of respectful engagement with women in the data, it appears that there is a hierarchy of respect where some relations are worthy of more respectful practices than others. This becomes clear in the discussion among this focus group:

> Matt:
> I think a lot of the problems with sexting is like, if it was just to hook up you'd go to your mates and be like, 'this is what I just got sent, look at this,' and there would be high fives all round. But if you were in a relationship with someone, it's like, 'that's my girlfriend, I'm not going to share that person around, because I'm attached to that person physically and emotionally.' Whereas with a hook up you don't get any feelings, and that photo can go anywhere, or that message can go anywhere and you can publicly humiliate someone. I don't know.

> Jim:
> That's the danger of it too on a less intimate, or less romantic level, is that usually if you don't have a previous relationship with the person then you can't necessarily trust them to not show other people, versus if you're romantically with them, you'd expect them not to at all.

What this extract illustrates is that different levels of 'attachment' also mean different levels of respect and responsibility. This troubles the notion of the respectful modern man, as it is clearly far from an egalitarian outlook. The participants distinguish between 'hook ups' and girlfriends, and because the former do not involve 'any feelings' there are wider parameters for sharing sexts from or photos of this person. As Liam says in another focus group discussing the same topic, 'if it's a one-night stand or if it's someone that you don't actually care about emotionally, then for some people they'll just send the pictures around. Just to show it to their mates, "hey, look at who I've gotten with"'. While the participants sometimes condemned this double standard, it was clear that they understood that one-night stands are particularly suited for proving one's masculinity, as discussed earlier. This kind of hierarchialising furthermore reinforces the prospects for slut shaming women, as found in other studies of sexting (e.g. Ravn et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2013). This is clear in the following exchange, where the men are talking about receiving an unsolicited image of a woman's genitals (in the same vein as women might receive an unsolicited 'dick pic'):

> David:
> I feel like that [an unsolicited 'vagina pic'] is what you show your mates.
>
> Theo:
> I feel like that's what you show your mates, because it's fucked.
>
> Brad:
> If it was my girlfriend, then no. If it was just random, a little . . . I mean, if they're going to be doing that, and they're not your girlfriend? They're a slut.
>
> Sean:
> Woah!
>
> Brad:
> Well, I don't know how else to put it, but do you agree? If someone just takes a picture of their vagina, and sends it to a random guy, and they don't know them, or they don't know who they are . . .
>
> Theo:
> Well, they wouldn't care anyway.
>
> David:
> I guess that's a little bit slutty.

> Girlfriends, on the other hand, invoke a sense of care and responsibility and sharing intimate photos of a girlfriend or long-time partner is generally not seen as acceptable because of this emotional involvement. According to the men in this group, this goes both ways as a generalised set of expectations. This means that they also cannot expect a woman, with whom they are not in a relationship, not to share sexts with her friends.

> Being a respectful man not only means committing to certain practices in terms of sharing and not sharing sexts, but also intervening when one experiences problematic and 'disrespectful' behaviours from other men. One example of this is described in the following exchange:

> Leon:
> There was a guy at our school who was very well known for sending messages and even stories, with a lot of sexual content, to various girls, girls that had boyfriends, girls that he didn't even know, because he thought that he could get away with it . . . The behaviour I disagree with. I'm actually friends with the guy, but I agree, his behaviour is so out of line. And we tell him that.
>
> Moderator:
> You tell him?
>
> Leon:
> We give him shit for doing it. We just say, in a not so straightforward way, we just say that it's wrong.
>
> Jim:
> I think he thinks that he's charming. For him it's a mindset though, he doesn't think that what he's doing is wrong. He thinks what he's doing is romantic. He'll brush it off as being a gag or funny or whatever, he just won't think about it.
>
> Moderator:
> But it sounds like his potentially, some of his other mates, don't validate his behaviour, and he's still doing it?
>
> Leon:
> Yeah, I think it's just a personal thing. I don't know how he's grown up or how he's been taught as he's grown up, or about his attitude to women . . .

This group, like most others, can easily identify what are acceptable and unacceptable ways of engaging in sexting practices, and indeed can draw a line between, on the one hand, sexting that is mutual and on the other hand, one-directional explicit sexual harassment (cf. Ravn et al., 2019; Roberts and Ravn, 2020; also Waling and Pym, 2019). They also link such practices to a general, problematic 'attitude to women'. Again, we can see the distinctions that the participants draw between themselves and other men in making sense of this kind of problematic behaviour. By presenting themselves as the ones noting and intervening in 'other people's' behaviour in such situations they also implicitly draw a moral boundary. And as the men here describe, they make it clear by 'giving him shit' that they do not approve of his practices. However, intervening with friends in this way is not easy and often happens 'in a not so straightforward way' because of the tension between maintaining the friendship and promoting respectful practices. This also demonstrates the difficulties in balancing a respectful and 'modern' (inclusive) masculinity with the demands to prove one's (conventional) masculinity. This was a recurring theme in the focus groups and a tension that was not straightforward to navigate. As Caleb puts it in another focus group, 'I feel like it's unspoken between . . . those unspoken rules, like, you fear like you have to [engage in explicit sharing]'. This illustrates that the 'unspoken rules' or dominant norms in some settings, such as the college that the men in Caleb's group are referring to, still put pressure on individual men to share explicit details and/or photos.

'Mature Guys' versus 'the Others'

Being respectful and knowing how to engage in sexting practices is not necessarily seen as an inherent trait or attitude that the men 'always' had. Rather, across the focus-group discussions, the participants reflected on how their perceptions and practices had changed over time as they had come to their present position. This is often woven into notions of maturity, and of having come to learn about respect. This is demonstrated in the following extract:

> Tim:
> At the start, in these younger year levels, these people that you know, you're kind of all like, 'oh that's cool,' and then you realise now that it's not cool.
>
> Matt:
> I don't think they do it [sext] seriously, they do it more to show their friends than to do it seriously.
>
> Karl:
> Kind of like a trophy.

In their younger years, the participants' sexting practices were reportedly less about actually engaging in a sexual relationship with a girl and more about receiving sexts from girls as 'a trophy' to be shared around to produce value and status amongst one's peers. This resonates with Ringrose and colleagues' (2013) finding that teenage boys build social capital amongst their peers by demonstrating their ability to receive sexts from girls. As they have grown older, however, what is seen as 'cool' has seemingly changed and they now view these practices in a different light. They relate these changes to their greater experience, as another focus group discussing the same issue describes:

> Ethan:
> A group chat on Facebook [was] so common, and you have all your mates, and it's common that someone, not so much anymore, this would have been a few years ago that I would have been involved, that someone sent something in a group chat, and that something goes to eight people, and those eight people have other mates in other group chats and then it just goes.
>
> Moderator:
> You said not so much anymore, do you think that changes with age then?
>
> Ethan:
> Yeah it's like what we were saying about maturity, especially when some of us have girlfriends and they're more serious, or just in relationships, or you understand that it's wrong.

Similar to the findings in Burkett's (2015) study of young adults' sexting practices, our participants also distance themselves from their younger selves, in this case how they were involved in group chats where 'something' was shared amongst the group. Their change in attitudes to what is appropriate sexting practices is about age and 'maturity' but also about having experience with romantic relationships. By presenting themselves as those who 'have girlfriends' and are 'more serious' and in that sense are 'enlightened' about what a relationship requires, they position themselves as more mature than their younger selves. We would argue that when this presentation is made in front of the moderator in the focus-group

context, this has the effect of writing off their earlier, potentially problematic practices as the deeds of naïve novices who simply did not know better, thereby diminishing, and even somewhat legitimising, these practices as a sort of rite of passage. It is also a way of distinguishing themselves from 'other', 'immature' men in their own current age category or life stage. This is even clearer in the following extract, where the same group is discussing the people whom they believe share sexts:

> Ethan:
> I think maybe someone who hasn't had experiences in actually long term relationships with people? Someone that hasn't dated someone and is constantly going from one person to another, doesn't have enough affection for people in that time.
>
> Martin:
> Just like this jealousy way of saying, people have good relationships with someone, and then he's like, 'but look at me, look at what I get, why are you staying loyal to one girl?' kind of thing? And maybe deep down they kind of wish they could have that, but yeah.
>
> Jerry:
> I think it's being self-conscious and making sure they're heterosexual and making sure they're the stereotypical manly man. It's an overcompensation obviously, but it's also probably what's going through their mind. They're like, 'I need to show that I do get this sometimes.' I'm assuming that's the type of person.

While the last part of the explanation here references the need for proving one's masculinity, as Jerry hints at, the participants also suggest that problematic sexting practices stem from men who have little experience with women, both in terms of dating and more sustained relationships. This makes sense; sexting can be seen as a practice that one must learn to engage in (Roberts and Ravn, 2020) and become more attuned to – or in this case more respectful – over time. It is also clear, however, that the participants in this focus group, as well as in other groups, make an effort to perform present selves who are mature and respectful and in that way come across as 'modern' and inclusive men in the focus-group setting. This is in contrast to those 'other' men who have little experience and hence engage in problematic and disrespectful sexting practices. There are clear parallels here to Burkett's (2015: 845) participants who 'spoke critically of other males showing or distributing sexts of women'.

In effect, the problematic sexting practices that participants identify are in nearly all cases carried out by others: friends, acquaintances or people they have heard of in school or elsewhere. This is particularly the case when it comes to accounts of more problematic practices such as men who collect nude photos; participants referred to this practice as 'nude farming', or men who 'swap nudes' in a 'trading system'. These stories, regardless of their validity, also serve a function in the context of the focus group as they allow the men to perform a normative masculine identity in the group setting and draw symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) towards these other men. This extends also to the ways the men sometimes positioned lower-educated men as being a part of this 'other' category. For instance, Kevin implicitly linked greater levels of maturity with differences in socioeconomic

status: 'They joke around and they don't care, they've got no prospects for jobs where your words can be held accountable? Say if you're a brickie [bricklayer], you don't care, you're not going to lose your job for sending a nude'. The performative nature of this process of discursive othering was, though, not entirely lost on the participants, with Tim (group 6) stating that 'yes, everyone in this group is saying we don't do it, but we wouldn't tell our friends if we did'.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on all-male focus-group discussions about sexting, we have followed calls in the literature to focus on 'everyday young men's own negotiations and performances of hetero-masculinity, particularly through the use of social media and digital communications' (Burkett, 2015: 860). In particular, we have done this through an exploration of how homosocial norms and practices play out in these discussions about sexting amongst existing groups of friends.

For the most part, existing research on men, masculinity and homosociality appears divided into two camps. One follows Connell's (1995) work on hegemonic masculinity and gender power, emphasises how men collectively (re)produce and legitimate patriarchal relations (e.g. Flood, 2008; Kalish and Kimmel, 2011; Pascoe, 2007). The second strand has a more positive outlook, following Anderson's (2009) lead in documenting how contemporary boys and men perform inclusive masculinities underpinned by an embrace of openness and intimacy and a rejection of homophobia (e.g. McCormack, 2012; Robinson et al., 2017). However, rather than neatly reflecting one theoretical/empirical strand or the other, our data illuminate a series of tensions in the production and doing of contemporary normative masculinities. On the one hand the participants described how they needed to demonstrate their sexual prowess and experience to do well in the masculine hierarchy, and how being able to demonstrate intimate relations with (attractive) women were serving this purpose. On the other hand, we saw an openness and willingness to reveal one's own vulnerabilities in relations to peers, reflecting a more inclusive masculinity. However, this inclusivity was not always mirrored in their relations and interactions with women. This points to two main findings from our research.

First, this illustrates how for young men, performing legitimate masculine identities is a balancing act that requires being attuned to both traditional, masculine norms as well as more contemporary, inclusive masculinities. At a first glance, this is in line with Hammarén and Johansson (2014) who argue that 'vertical' as well as 'horizontal' dimensions of homosociality co-exist. The men collectively produced ideas and ideals that were both reinforcing existing gender structures while also revealing openness and respect, for one another and for (some of) their sexual partners. There are echoes here of a point made 35 years ago by Jenkins (1983), who stressed the need to understand the flexibility of masculine identities, such that, as per the title of his book, boys could be Lads, Citizens and Ordinary Kids, rather than one or the other (see also Waling, 2019). In our case, this means that young men are simultaneously 'lads' prioritising homosocial relations over relations with female partners and objectifying women to prove their masculine status as well as respectful men

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who call out bad behaviour and emphasise trust and mutuality in their relations with women. But this co-existence of vertical and horizontal dimensions of homosociality is not straightforward. On the contrary, as the analysis showed, it creates a number of tensions and challenges for the young participants in our study. This includes finding ways of proving that one is sexually active and capable without this turning into bragging. It includes having a joke ready at hand but simultaneously being open to friends about theirs or one's own insecurities. And it includes engaging in respectful and committed, romantic interactions with girlfriends, while at the same time being ready to share intimate information – or sexts – from casual partners or 'one-night stands' – often to serve the purpose of proving one's masculinity.

This leads to the second key finding which is the 'hierarchy of respect' that the focus group reveals in the men's interactions with and discussions about women. What the analysis revealed was a differentiation between 'committed girlfriends' and 'other girls'. We also saw how some forms of conduct were deemed 'too slutty' for a woman. As we have argued elsewhere (Ravn et al., 2019), even the emphasis on trust and privacy in relations with girlfriends can at times be seen to reflect a self-interest in 'feeling special', rather than (solely) a genuine respect for the partner and the trust implied in sending an intimate sext. While inclusive masculinity theory offers a generally positive account of modern masculinities and social change, it has predominantly emphasised relations between boys/men and has yet to pay any significant attention to how or whether transformations in homosocial relations come to bear on men's relations with women (O'Neill, 2015), a point with which Anderson and McCormack (2018) concur. Our findings take one step towards addressing this imbalance, paying particular attention to how groups of male friends talk about women in the context of sexting and to some extent wider intimate and romantic relations. Hence, the findings in our analysis are mixed and suggest that positive attitudes towards and relations with other men do not automatically or fully 'spill over' into positive attitudes towards women and respectful men–women relations. This means exercising some caution when appraising the extent of positive social change (see also Karioris, 2019; Ravn et al, 2019; Ralph and Roberts, 2020; Roberts 2018; Thurnell-Read, 2012).

Balancing the co-existence of both vertical and horizontal aspects of homosociality requires careful navigation on the young men's part, as the stakes involved are high. This is reflected in the efforts to perform legitimate and acceptable identities in and beyond the focus-group setting. We drew on the concept of symbolic boundary work (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) to illustrate how the tensions in play are not just 'innocent' differences, but moral tensions about what are normative masculine identities. A number of boundaries were drawn in attempts to position the participants themselves as 'morally superior' – compared to 'others' who share privately received sexts, brag about their sexual successes or are 'inexperienced' with romantic relations, including their younger selves.

Rather than seeing this concern with distancing themselves from what was seen as inappropriate forms of engagement with women as something that simply develops over time, through processes of maturation and moral development, we suggest viewing this

against the broader backdrop of growing awareness of the gendered harms of non-consensual sexting practices and an emerging culture of 'counter-discipline' (Hess and Flores, 2018) in which digital instances of 'toxic' masculinity are being increasingly held to account. Hence, Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) point to the increasing focus of the popular press on 'various [online] expressions of toxic masculinity', along with an insurgent 'popular feminism' that has also helped to place such issues into the public consciousness, not least through the #MeToo movement. In the same vein, Powell and Henry (2017: 14) highlight 'the innovative ways in which digital technologies are facilitating the pursuit of "digital" or "informal" justice, as well as feminist activism'. And further to this, examining the popular Instagram page Tinder Nightmares, Hess and Flores (2018: 1097–1098) similarly demonstrate how online expressions of hegemonic masculinity are being 'subject to a counter-disciplinary challenge and external regulation by women', and how this 'feminist digilantism' (Jane, 2016) riposte then provides 'learning moments for other [male] users about how to properly perform'. Such potential threats of reprisal, then, may likely also contribute to the men in our study regulating and reflecting on their own views. In this sense, what we are seeing in the young men's accounts of sexting detailed in this article is an active negotiation of masculinity in a digital context that produces and is intertwined with new modes of intimacy and sexual practices (Dobson et al., 2018). Our findings also make clear, though, that despite the productive, disciplinary role of digital technologies, the production and performance of young masculinities in contemporary youth culture still relies on the articulation of hierarchies that legitimate gender inequality, even when espousing progressive views.

Reflecting this, our article points towards the ongoing need at a more practical-educational level for challenging the idea that masculinity is tied to sexual prowess, or as a bare minimum continuing to promote respectful ways of 'proving' masculinities. The performative layer of the discussions in the focus groups suggest that most participants are very aware of the normative ways of performing masculinity, yet still perform ways of speaking and acting that are aligned with hegemonic masculinity.

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