

# Sexualized platformed female bodies in male online practices

## Negotiating boundaries of masculinity, gendered positioning, and intimacy

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MedieKultur 2021, 71, 73-97

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | [www.smid.dk](http://www.smid.dk)

The online version of this text can be found open access at [www.mediekultur.dk](http://www.mediekultur.dk)

### **Abstract**

*Sexualized images of the bodies of girls and young women – in some cases taken without the knowledge of those depicted, in other cases exchanged as part of erotic or romantic interactions – sometimes turn up in closed groups on social media and on websites and other online platforms. In their efforts to mark and prove masculinity, the (presumably) male participants in these fora share, trade, and evaluate such imagery. The young women depicted are generally commented upon in condescending ways. Based on a combination of digital ethnography and analogue fieldwork and interviews at a vocational school in Denmark, this article explores how boys and young men use sexualized female bodies to negotiate boundaries of masculinity, gendered positioning, and intimacy. Through new materialist and poststructuralist perspectives, we attend to the entanglements of social and technological phenomena enacting these practices.*

### **Keywords**

*digital media; gender; image-based abuse; masculinity; young people; sexuality*

## Introduction

Today, digitally enabled possibilities for exchanging sexualized imagery are an important aspect of young people's navigation of identities and of social, romantic, and erotic relationships. Pictures and videos of sexualized bodies are an integral part of young people's negotiations of boundaries for appropriate and inappropriate gender appearance and performance – and thereby also of how to be and become gendered youth (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016; Naezer & Ringrose, 2019; Renold & Ringrose, 2016; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013; Salter, 2016). These practices of exchange include sexting, where (mostly) girls share imagery of their (semi-)naked bodies with male peers (Hasinoff, 2015). Sometimes, however, the practices take more abusive forms, with imagery being spread (mostly by the boys and young men) without consent to peers and further on to more or less publicly accessible online platforms, fora, and sites – some inspired by abusive and toxic adult communities (Ging, 2017; Jane, 2014; Massanari, 2017). Here, the imagery may be discussed, evaluated, and traded, while the girls depicted are deprived of any agency.

In this paper, we follow boys and young men as they engage with digital imagery of sexualized bodies of girls and young women, both on- and offline. We discuss how their use and sharing of this imagery helps maintain or redraw boundaries of masculinity, gendered positioning, and intimacy. Our research material includes selfies and other self-produced imagery of girls. It remains unclear exactly how the imagery has traveled from private to more or less public digital spaces. Previous research indicates that girls may share such material to demonstrate trust to a friend or boyfriend (Amundsen, 2019), as a way to attract the interest of males (Albury & Crawford, 2012), to sexually please a boyfriend (Van Ouytsel et al., 2018), or as a form of self-expression (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015; Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). However, our research material also includes examples of imagery that appears to have been captured and shared without the consent or knowledge of the girls depicted. Such incidents may be a result of, for instance, conflictual relationships (Van Ouytsel et al., 2017), visual gossiping (Johansen et al., 2018), cyberbullying (Shaheen, 2014) – or attempts to exert violence and abuse (Henry & Flynn, 2019; Powell & Henry, 2014; Powell et al., 2018). No matter how the imagery was produced and with which intentions, when it falls into the hands of boys and young men who use it to nurture asymmetric gender discourses, it becomes the object of degrading and malicious negotiations of homosociality and hegemonic (hyper)masculinity (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016; Henry & Flynn, 2019; Hunehall & Odenbring, 2020; Johansen et al., 2018).

This also seems to be the case with the imagery we encountered in our study, particularly when entering the aforementioned abusive and toxic sites dominated by purportedly male users. Other contemporary and more transformative gender discourses are apparently entirely silenced in these male interactions and sexist online communities and fora. Here, the pluralization of masculinities and challenging of gender dichotomies described in much contemporary literature (Gottzén et al., 2020) are met by what Matthews (2016) terms a “male preserve”, attempting to hold back the tide of change (for a discussion on

the conceptualization of male preserve in relation to sports, see Matthews & Channon, 2019).

We begin with a brief examination of the research on depictions of sexualized digital bodies before outlining a number of theoretical conceptualizations from new materialism and poststructuralism. Next, we outline our methodological approach, combining digital ethnography and analogue fieldwork and interviews in a network of entangled analogue-digital research material that forms the basis of our analysis. We offer insight into – and hopefully also more complex and refined understandings of – the ways some female bodies are platformed through the male interaction on certain online sites centered around sexualized bodies of female peers. This involves demonstrating the extremely hateful and abusive expressions and practices on these sites. These expressions and practices are both provocative and offensive, and we in no way intend to perpetuate such male discourses and thereby undermine or discount the suffering experienced by the depicted girls. Nor is it our intention to ignore or downplay the boys' responsibility for their words and actions. Instead, we closely scrutinize these offensive practices and seek to provide insights into the dynamics contributing to their brutality.

## Previous research

Research emphasizes how contemporary culture is saturated with sexuality (Attwood, 2009; Gill, 2007; McNair, 2002; Paasonen et al., 2007), and according to Amundsen (2019) in ways that enact a heightened level of “pornormativity” (Bell, 2006; Slater, 1998), implying conventions of how to sexually interact, such as how to produce, share, and interpret private sexualized imagery in digitally mediated interactions (Amundsen, 2019). Pornography is thus an important inspiration for people engaging with sexualized, platformed female bodies. Yet, this engagement also seems affected by technological affordances. Handyside and Ringrose (2017), for instance, emphasize how the ephemerality offered by the social media app Snapchat invites users to share more explicit imagery than they would otherwise. Furthermore, the possibilities for posting, sending, liking, and commenting upon imagery, Ringrose and Harvey (2015) argue, lead to comprehensive surveillance, followed by judgement, shaming, and sexualization of especially female bodies and their abilities to perform according to these sexualized norms and conventions. In the following, we therefore discuss previous research on pornography, its entanglement with technological possibilities, and its relevance in relation to young people's practices.

### *Pornography and user-generated sexualized imagery*

Since the legislation in 1969 in Denmark that permitted and legitimized the production and sale of sexually explicit material, pornography has developed into an extensive public entertainment industry generating huge economic profit. This is also the case in many other countries worldwide. Paasonen (2011, p. 49) describes pornography's general ambi-

tion as to stimulate fantasies, desires, and gratification in “its hyperbolic depictions of social categories and scenarios where the relations between people, objects, and environments are markedly sexual”. However, others emphasize that pornography mainly feeds on gender asymmetries and on sensualized and embodied social categories saturated with power, primarily nurtured among men (Levy, 2005). The technological infrastructure and its possibilities have, however, paved the way for people to also produce and circulate their own private sexualized imagery (Dobson, 2011; Wilkinson, 2017). Much of this imagery imitates codes from commercial pornography but addresses a desire for familiarity and authenticity within pornography (Macleod, 2020; Paasonen, 2011), and it is meant to resonate with a sense of intimacy among users (Jacobs, 2004; Paasonen, 2011; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015).

Some of this imagery is produced and shared in romantic and erotic interactions. In other cases, imagery is shared directly on social media by those depicted. In the perspective of a general objectification of women’s bodies in society, it is suggested that these women feel liberated and empowered as they regain agency over their bodies and are able to articulate the interpretation of their expression (Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel, 2020; Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Following Amundsen (2019), however, interpretations of sexualized female bodies are not solely dependent on how the body is represented, but very much also on the context in which the imagery appears and the norms of consumption related to these contexts. As the imagery travels through time and space, perhaps ending up on abusive and illicit online sites (Henry & Flynn, 2019) saturated with heteronormative, gender-asymmetric discourses that nourish and sometimes even encourage sexual violence (Massanari, 2017), the depicted body enters quite different realms of interpretation than those intended when the imagery was produced (Rasmussen & Søndergaard, 2020).

### *Young people’s sexualized digital imagery of peers*

The tendencies concerning material produced and exchanged among adults are also recognizable among young people. Harder et al. (2020), for example, emphasize how young people also imitate pornography. Although the material they produce may appear less explicit, the imagery often travels across digital spaces and becomes associated with multiple meanings depending on the normative discourses of the contexts and communities within these spaces (Rasmussen & Søndergaard, 2020). Mandau (2020) emphasizes that young people prefer their own imagery to porn, as it depicts “real” situations involving someone their own age – and not the idealized adult bodies and situations found in much pornography.

However, the sharing of this imagery is not only a way of stimulating sexual excitement among young people; the depicted bodies become part of negotiations of social and gendered positioning and relations by being shared, evaluated, and used. Salter (2016), for example, addresses the gender differences in the way imagery is interpreted, emphasizing

that undressed digitalized female bodies are conflated with pornography, while undressed digitalized male bodies have different and much broader associations, such as humor or athleticism. According to Ringrose et al. (2013), such interpretations of exposed bodies – and the positions associated with these interpretations – entail much more stringent social judgement of girls than of boys depicted in similar situations. Such gender differences enable sexualized imagery of female peers to function as homosocial capital among boys (Hunehäll & Odenbring, 2020) in their efforts to demonstrate hegemonic masculinity, establish gendered hierarchies, and maintain social bonds and gain recognition among male peers (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016; Johansen et al., 2018; Ravn et al., 2019). Being sent such imagery is a mark of prestige among boys and young men, while simultaneously posing a threat to girls and young women due to the risk of it being leaked online.

The reiteration and affirmation of masculinity in producing, receiving, and sharing such material takes many forms. Some of the exchanges among young people happen with the consent of both parties and aim to confirm gendered bonding based on heteronormativity, and thereby also masculine and feminine recognition and attraction (Amundsen, 2019). The forms of masculinity nurtured and affirmed by interactions on the online sites and platforms in focus in this article are of a different kind – and have only been explored by a very limited number of studies (for examples, see Hall & Hearn, 2019; Henry & Flynn, 2019; Jørgensen & Demant, 2021; Langlois & Slane, 2017; Uhl et al., 2018). To the best of our knowledge, none of these studies, however, include considerations of young people's access to, participation in, or adoption of norms from such online sites and communities.

## Theoretical departure

Our study is based on new materialist thinking, which helps us to understand human and non-human phenomena as agential and productive in and through their entanglements. New materialist frameworks underline the ongoing enactment of (social) phenomena and becoming of the world as effects of *intra-active* material-discursive agencies (Barad, 2007; Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011). In Karen Barad's development of agential realism, she (2007) uses the term *intra-action*, rather than *interaction*, to maintain the focus on material and discursive phenomena as mutually saturating, intertwining, and transforming in ways that continually produce new *intra-acting* phenomena. New materialist conceptualizations therefore enable us to approach the young people, their actions, intentions, and bodies as agencies that entangle with the social and gendered performances, discourses, and practices as well as with the technological possibilities, affordances and digital invitations. All of these phenomena remain mutually saturating and transforming in the production of the young people's practices.

### **Boundary work**

Following Barad (2007, 2008), material-discursive entanglements of the world should be explored through *apparatuses* – practices through which differential boundaries and properties of entangled phenomena come to matter. Barad (2008, p. 173) considers apparatuses as “specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific boundaries [of phenomena materializing the world] are enacted”. These boundaries are produced through agential cuts, including and excluding phenomena in and of the apparatuses (Barad, 2007). The boundaries maintained and negotiated by the boys and young men in our study concern, for instance, the kinds of masculine performances, gendered positioning, and intimate relations that are or are not considered appropriate, valued, and included – and ultimately, who and how it is possible to be, and to become, part of and relate to particular social communities.

To help specify this kind of boundary work, we also draw on Jamieson (2005), who conceptualizes boundary work as ideas, thoughts, talk, writing, and discourse that create consequential difference and division, produced by “material forms of coordinated interaction, such as moderating flows of exchange and modifying movements of people across space and time” (p. 190). Thinking this conceptualization of boundary work through Barad’s understanding of boundary drawing practices as intra-active apparatuses allows us to explore boys’ and young men’s use of the body to negotiate boundaries of masculinity, gendered positioning, and intimacy as enactments and reenactments of both discursive (e.g., ideas, norms, communities, and cultural codes) and materially entangled phenomena (e.g., the local and digital spaces and their particular possibilities and affordances) (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2017; Verbeek, 2005).

### **The body, gendered positioning, and masculinity**

The platformed body challenges existing theoretical understandings of the biological and physical body as confined to the flesh borders of the individual (de Freitas & Sinclair, 2014), by others described as the “home of recognition, judgement, categorizations, and subsequently social consideration and treatment” (Warfield et al., 2020, p. 1). Through the possibilities offered by digital technologies, the body is reconfigured. It emerges, takes shape, and is ascribed meanings in new and different ways (Slater, 1998) that go beyond the skin (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1991; Warfield, 2016). In alignment with our new materialist approach, Warfield (2016) argues that meanings of the visual digital body come to matter through entangled configurations that also include the camera, the image, the gendered norms, the spaces, and the audiences. The meanings of both the undressed, sexualized digital bodies, their abilities and appraisals, the faceless digital male users, and the “in flesh” male participants in boundary negotiations are as such entangled with both discursive and material phenomena (in our study, social and technological phenomena) and configured in new ways, depending on the particular analogue and digital phenomena (Warfield et al., 2020).

Although all of these phenomena contribute to fluid processes of bodily meaning-making and mattering, gender seems to be of particular importance. Our encounters with the boys and young men in our research material show that both female and male bodies in sexualized digital practices involving imagery are interpreted and positioned through remarkably stable reiterations of asymmetrical gender discourses and gendered norms. Our analyses of these reiterative processes draw on Butler (1990, 1993) and Davies (2000), who emphasize gendered positioning as relational processes of becoming. Butler (1993) emphasizes gender as doing – a performative, reiterative practice of norms that matter and congeal into taken-for-granted practices. These norms and gendered demarcations are negotiated and formed through reiterations, but always in slightly moderated versions (Søndergaard, 2002). In a new materialist re-thinking, reiterative gendered positioning has been reconceptualized as material-discursively enacted practices that are not only relational, discursive, and performative, but also material intra-agencies (Højgaard & Søndergaard, 2011; Søndergaard, 2013). Following this line of thinking, masculinity is also seen as material-discursively enacted, processual, and relational. In other words, masculinity is intra-agentially enacted – a conceptualization that expands the post-structuralist understanding of intersectionality to not only include social categories, but also a wider range of material and matterings, such as technologies, in the formation of gender. Gottzén et al. (2020) emphasize masculinity as plural, underlining masculinities in their intersection with femininities and other gender positionings. All in all, this thinking involves an analytical perspective on gender as a fluid and proliferating social category produced in tensions between dissolving and congealing intra-agencies and formations.

## Methodology

Our methodological approach is shaped by an explorative and situated use of multiple methods across both on- and offline spaces (Leander & McKim, 2003; Markham & Baym, 2009; Postill & Pink, 2012). The research material is produced through a combination of digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Hine et al., 2009; Markham, 2013; Markham & Gammelby, 2018; Pink et al., 2016) as well as analogue fieldwork (Marcus, 1995, 1999) and interviews conducted among young people aged 15–20. The majority of the research material was produced by Penille.

Penille conducted digital ethnography over a six-month period. For approximately three hours a day, she lurked (Garcia et al., 2009) on social and digital media used, primarily by boys and young men, to post, exchange, and interact around sexualized digital imagery of peers. These media included Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, Dropbox, Discord servers, and various fora and sites dedicated specifically to the sharing of sexualized imagery (we refrain from naming all of these platforms for ethical reasons, so as not to invite further traffic). This resulted in 20 pages of observation notes on and approx. 300 screenshots of imagery, user interactions, norms and contexts, digital

architectures, etc. Together with Dorte Marie's digital ethnography, conducted more sporadically over a longer period of time on a smaller range of some of the same sites, this material forms the main foundation for our analyses. Penille, however, also carried out fieldwork in a class at a vocational school with 18 young people (16 boys and 2 girls), including interviews with most of the class, as well as a few students from another class at the same school – a total of 21 young people (3 girls and 18 boys) – from which we use examples to unfold our analytical points. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and focused on themes and experiences related to sexualized digital imagery, e.g., norms, gender, sexuality, community, and digital media. The young people generously shared all sorts of stories about their relationships, sexual experiences, desires, problems, and dilemmas.

As Internet-related phenomena are messy (Markham & Baym, 2009) and often take place across online and offline spaces, we followed Burrell (2009) and approached the totality of our research material as a network that constitutes the field site – not bound in localities, but in things (Pink, 2015) or data points (Markham & Gammelby, 2018) that intertwine in unpredictable movements. However, studying young people, users, imagery, interactions, and movements in online and offline spaces and across various media and localities involves an epistemological uncertainty (Sundén, 2012) that generates certain difficulties. One crucial difficulty is the link between analogue and digital practices. We had no idea whether the users we encountered online were the same kinds of people as those encountered at the vocational school. Some of them may have been. They all used various social media, and all of the boys were currently or had previously been part of groups where sexualized imagery of girls was exchanged without consent. Some of them had access to sites and private Dropboxes with large repositories of non-consensually shared sexualized imagery of girls, but claimed that they had only consumed this imagery, never contributed to it. Despite this uncertainty, the information from the fieldwork and interviews has enabled us to make sense of some of the practices we witnessed in the digital spaces – as well as of how the discourses characterizing these analogue and digital spaces intersect and inform each other.

### ***Ethics***

Researching young people's multiple, differentiated, and sometimes abusive sexualized digital practices entails difficult ethical and legal dilemmas. To manage the legal issues, we reported the study to the Danish Data Protection Agency and received approval from the Danish State Attorney to carry out the study. Meanwhile, general ethical research principles (e.g., informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and minimizing harm to those involved) did not seem sufficient in relation to the ethical issues and dilemmas our research involved. We have therefore also drawn on the thinking of Martin et al. (2015) and Søndergaard (2019), who re-conceptualize ethics to not only consider the well-being of the individual, but also the processes and functioning of the more comprehensive

apparatuses that enact individual being and becoming. We furthermore incorporated the ethical guidelines developed by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR), which emphasize ethics as a process of continuous reflection and situational decisions made in specific contextual settings (Franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Some of the dilemmas have been extremely difficult, and we have continuously balanced the well-being and protection of individuals against the importance of the research and its anticipated reparative contribution to digital apparatuses that produce youth culture (Søndergaard, 2019).

We obtained both written and oral informed consent from the school to carry out the fieldwork and from all of the young people who participated in the interviews. Digital spaces are, however, very different from analogue settings, and we were not able to anticipate or even imagine the paths the study would lead us down, with most of our decisions made along the way. Mostly, it was impossible to identify those involved; on other occasions, our observations were conducted in Facebook groups with more than 100,000 members or on websites with an unknown number of users and lurkers, which made it impossible to ask everyone for consent. Along the way, we came across various kinds and levels of engagement with sexualized digital imagery. We reported all of the systematic criminal activities we witnessed during the digital ethnography to the relevant authorities, but not the somewhat mundane, yet perhaps technically illegal, practices of the students at the vocational school. We have likewise been extremely careful to anonymize all sites, storage folders, users, and names in order to protect those involved and to prevent potentially curious readers from entering the platforms. The content of the citations has not been changed, but the translation from Danish to English contributes to concealing their origin. Our ethical considerations furthermore involved reflections regarding the protection of the girls and young women depicted in the imagery used by the young men. We certainly could not post any of the images in the analyses, and we were careful to ensure that none of those depicted could be recognized or recognize themselves from our descriptions.

It is important to emphasize that our ethical research responsibility is directed towards the comprehensive apparatus that produces these dynamics and patterns, effecting harm and vulnerability for some while catching others in damaging behavior. An alternative, more reductionist and individualizing approach that applied predetermined fixed positionings to the young people as either victims or perpetrators would have taken a more simplistic analytical turn and prevented us from studying the ways in which the apparatus produces such positionings and the related behavior. Our approach may be provocative for some readers, because we follow practices in digital spaces that are more or less concealed from the public, and we do so with an open curiosity while trying to understand what happens. The intention is not to “go native”, but to produce thick descriptions. To transform such closed sites and fora and their destructive agency, we need such descriptions. We must understand the rationales and practices that pro-

duce and maintain them. In short, we need to get close to the thinking and doing of these boys and young men to be able to unravel how this apparatus operates and which kind of culture and normativity it feeds on and nurtures.

## Analysis

Moving into and across the research material, our initial idea was to read, watch, sense, and, little by little, digest what we encountered on our way, while using empathy and even a certain amount of care for individuals and the apparatuses producing these cultures and practices (Martin et al., 2015; Søndergaard, 2019). Such principles would guide our readings, which, we presumed, would enable us to gain insight into how boys and young men use sexualized digital imagery of female bodies to negotiate boundaries of masculinity, gendered positioning, and intimacy. We wanted to follow in the steps of the boys' and young men's dreams and desires and try to capture their relational struggles and endeavors. We would track the mattering discourses and understandings they move with and within. By understanding, we would be able to access the processes that enact the gendered becoming and relations of these young people, some of whom we only encountered as web-fora participants, others in person at the vocational school. The empathetic approach worked relatively well in relation to the material from the vocational school. However, turning to our material from the digital ethnography, this analytical approach was repeatedly challenged. We were struck by the extreme dedication and intensity with which the homosocial communities of male subjects inhabit particular platforms, particularly how they cultivate hatred and contempt as part of their shared practices – targeting the girls and young women whose representations they evaluate and circulate.

In order to allow thick descriptions of this, however limited, we do not censor or rephrase the boys' and young men's words. The excerpts and descriptions from the empirical material that follow thus contain offensive and violent language. Without the insight provided by accurately recounting and describing the field, discourses and agencies from other realities outside these platforms cannot entangle in ways that may transform and reform the response-abilities of these more or less secret societies.

### *Encountering the platformed young men and the female bodies they center around*

"Is she worth fucking?" PornRat asks. He receives a response: "Suppose she is an ok horny cum bucket! Loves riding horses and cocks. I have pictures for trade". But Toilet disagrees: "Don't think so; she is a grenade!" He closes the dialogue. Users have profile names such as PornRat, Toilet, Anonymous, TheSkyRocket, HashFactory, and Wee-Wee. Humorous, weird, and characteristic pseudonyms, which are by no means passive, but contribute to establishing a specific identity in the online fora, as also pointed out by Van der Nagel and Frith (2015). Other, apparently fearless, participants use their ordinary first and surnames (Facebook has a real-name policy and an extensive surveillance system to maintain it).

Reading further, we encounter Keksimum Maximuz, who posts a nude of a racialized brown girl and asks: "What is the name of this slave". Soggy offers her name and tells where she lives. Anonymous: "Where is the folder where she has sex with different men?" He receives the information he asked for. "Hi, I want to buy pictures of [name of a girl and her home town]. I can also trade, have good stuff!" The voices blend. "Have nothing to trade with but is willing to pay for a dropbox with girls from [town names]", and the posts keep mixing: "Who is this one getting fucked by a nigger?" Racism and sexism intersect in the stream of posts and reinforce the degradation of the young women.

These sites contain seemingly endless pictures of breasts, butts, and sperm-covered female faces. Kamran, a young man from the vocational school, can help us understand from where such collections of imagery emerge. Referring to his own collection of imagery, he explains that some of it is sent by girlfriends, but that much of it is secretly captured during his erotic encounters. Judging by the affirming nods from the boys sitting nearby and the sheer quantity of imagery we have encountered online, these practices appear to be *very* common. However, the various platforms also contain ordinary pictures of girls walking down the street, sunbathing on beaches, and sitting in cafes – images taken, for example, from Instagram or from school photos – followed by requests for nudes of these same girls. There are breasts without faces and butts with neither faces, legs, nor torsos, that nevertheless are the object of intense guesswork regarding the name and hometown of the young women they may depict.

Some requests are responded to with promises that simultaneously guarantee authenticity: "I know her. Can get her into something dirty and provide the pictures, if you have something to trade with?" The voices keep adding – endlessly asking for the names of the young women depicted in the posted pictures or begging for pictures of named women or women from particular towns and areas. Identification of the person depicted is clearly a central part of the activity, along with evaluations: "Arrrh, worms in the cunt!" Thomas writes in relation to a picture of a young woman, posted in a Facebook group. He is applauded by several boys, who post long rows of laughing emoji. The choir continues: "Anybody know the name of this one?"; "I need pictures of [name of a person] from [a town in the region]"; "Throw it on Discord, let's get it"; "Hey come on, share!" Compared to the boys and young men we met in person at the vocational school, the users of this platform are extremely explicit in expressing their thoughts and opinions about the imagery. They seem to nurture a particular attitude to those depicted that makes us wonder: How do fellow human beings get reduced to "cum buckets", "kind of horny", or even "grenades"? How does their existence shrink to slave status or to someone with worms in their genitals as their pictures pass over the screens of these young men in seemingly endless streams? And why? What is the purpose, the value of these practices for the young male participants?

The online culture on these platforms seems relatively well-established, and most of the participants apparently agree on the purpose, norms, and rules. In some fora, we

witness new themes suddenly emerging – such as claims about “immigrants who should leave the country” or about the “lousy people receiving welfare benefits and committing crimes”. Contempt and harsh evaluations proliferated and became intertwined with the sexualization of female bodies. However, the majority of the activity runs along the recorded lines of sexualization and surprisingly never seems to exhaust the participants: “Find pictures of her”; “What is the name of this bitch”; “is she a whore?”; “bet she sold herself”; “This one – where is her school, anyone that can help?”; “I will buy anything of this cunt. Send to my mail”; “Anyone that knows this cum bucket – bet she is a whore”; “Ha, sure, where did she sell herself and for how much?” Requests, mutual affirmations, offers to trade, and encouragement to share kept flowing, blended with exchanges of email addresses or directions to Dropbox, Discord, and other image-boards and platforms.

Admittedly, we initially found it difficult to make sense of these exchanges. Some of the young men were easy to identify by their e-mail addresses or by the names they chose for their profiles – a few clicks further into Facebook or merely searching on Google showed what seem to be completely normal young men: schoolboys, apprentices, young men with jobs. There was no reason to consider them anything other than ‘well-functioning’, ordinary young men, perhaps even charming and caring friends, sons, brothers, boyfriends, and colleagues. We were mystified and bewildered. But the contrast between the rough and distanced tone on these sites and the seemingly ordinary school boys and apprentices like those we met at the vocational school piqued our curiosity, so we continued to trace patterns and trajectories of meaning and mattering through the material.

### *Desirability and access*

Conversations regarding the traded pictures and videos predominantly take the form of multiple short utterances, stating the girls’ status in terms of desirability and (presumed or wished for) sexual accessibility. Berlant (1998, p. 281) emphasizes the function of desire as instantiation of intimacy that “involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way”. The boys’ and young men’s aspiration for “a story” – or a fantasy – is materialized by the platformed female body and concentrates on age, appearance, and how the imagery would fit their fantasies about the intimate context and circumstances for having their male genitals squeezed by live human flesh. Nurturing and affirming their positioning as male, their male bonding rooted in opposition to women and what they consider feminine, their access to female bodies as proof of what they consider appropriate masculinity – all of this seems to be deeply embedded in aspirations and fantasies expressed in their shared online agency on these platforms. Although the boys’ and young men’s preferences when it comes to female bodies tend to follow shared norms and conventions, negotiating the boundaries of these norms, adjusting to them, reiterating them, and sometimes also pushing them a bit as the bodies pass through the platforms are all activities that the community seems to engage in. So, what are these negotiations about?

First, negotiating appearance is about determining whether the depicted bodies perform certain “gender scripts” (van Doorn, 2010) within the boundaries of being female. The female performativity forms the relational condition for the young men’s own gender performance. Among the participants in our study, the depicted female bodies and body parts had to be very explicitly *readable* as belonging to one and only one side in a clear-cut dichotomy dividing human beings into two gender categories. Breasts and butts must leave no doubt as to the biological sex of the person depicted; the community dismisses any association with inter-, trans-, non-binary gender or other nuances, blurring or shifting of gendered positioning, or anything else troubling this dichotomy. The flesh that is to squeeze the genitals of the young men must beyond any doubt belong to girls or young women in easily read female bodies. In this way, the depicted bodies are ascribed value and gain currency in what Ringrose et al. (2013) have described as “the heterosexual visual economy” of image-sharing practices.

The demand for bodies that are easily recognizable as female is, as already mentioned, not only a recognition and demarcation of the female gender, but even more importantly of the male gender and of the boys’ and young men’s ability to inhabit a legitimate subject position, as Butler (1993) would term it. An interview with Mason, a student at the vocational school, illustrates this point. He talks about his twin brother, who has no interest in female nudes whatsoever and who he therefore concludes must be either “mentally underdeveloped or gay”. While asking Mason about this, another boy, George, interrupts the conversation and refers to the normalcy of engaging with female nudes: “It is just the way we think as boys, well unless you are homo”. This engagement is what defines their identity as a boy or young man, which, in cases of uncertainty, needs to be recognized and confirmed by other males. In this way, the boys’ engagement with and sharing of sexualized digital imagery of desirable female bodies is evidence proving “high-status masculinity” and “masculine success” (Harvey & Ringrose, 2016).

In this economy of gender and hierarchization, age is also a factor: The bodies of the depicted women must be young. And with no marks of “use”. On the observed platforms, there is some discussion of how young should be allowed – some users argue that such limits are not relevant in these fora, where transgressing boundaries is in itself seen as a badge of honor; others want to strike more of a balance and warn of surveillance and potential interference by the authorities.<sup>1</sup> How “used” the women whose images are posted can be is, likewise, a matter of debate, however spilling over in accessibility. In one conversation, the participants try yet again to agree about a woman’s desirability: “This bitch is too ugly, she is too fat. She wants dick though, that’s one plus”, Loll writes. “She is too old and worn out”, Scout-guy replies. Loll: “The ugly girls need dick too! A bitch

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1 Under Danish law, imagery of persons under the age of 18 portrayed in explicit sexual situations are characterized as child pornography. An exemption, however, allows persons aged 15–18 to share sexualized imagery with the consent of all concerned.

can't get enough dick". Scout-guy: "Hell no, not my dick! I'd rather jerk off". He continues: "And look, she doesn't even know how! – it is too boring, too nice! Leave it and move on, you never get anywhere". Loll: "What the fuck do you know about that? I'm 23 and have fucked my share of bitches". Scout-guy: "it's got nothing to do with being worn out because they have had too much dick" – and D interrupts: "A bitch is more worn out after giving birth, goddammit, than from getting a bit of dick". Loll defends the rights of the "old and ugly": "Christ – the gross girls should also get some cock!", and Scout-guy chooses to retreat: "Yeah, sure – but not my dick!" He receives one last rebuke from danishdude, who jokes: "Deep down, that is what you want, ain't it!"

The boys' and young men's (d)evaluations of the depicted girl's body as ugly and worn out are not only about their sexual desires – or, in this case, their disgust – but reflects a number of different facets of gendered positioning. Young and innocent girls hold the promise of easily established asymmetrical power relations. This direct route to male-female asymmetry via age difference, however, competes with the marking and proving of masculinity in terms of the quantity of female bodies accessible to and consumed by the boys and young men. The greater the quantity of accessible and consumed female genitals, the better one's chances of proving one's masculinity in these fora. As such, compromises regarding age and attractiveness are sometimes necessary. The boys and young men both identify with and compete against each other in order to prove their masculine positioning (Flood, 2008). The masculine success of these boys is, however, not only a question of accessibility, but also of demonstrating their ability to classify bodies and decide which ones to engage with.

Another interesting parameter in the users' evaluations of desirability is the intense focus on the pictures' status as either private or public. Images from commercial pornography are not considered interesting, and any suspicion that a user has simply posted an image they have found on a random porn site and offered such material for trade or exchange, thereby cheating to receive the real gold (pictures of ordinary girls) from other users leads to heavy criticism of this user. Desirability is closely filtered through judgements of whether the girls are real and authentic; i.e., girls who live "ordinary" lives, unaware that they are being watched by a wider audience or just by someone who they did not intend to see them without clothes. Making such a distinction is, however, a difficult task, as commercial pornography intermingles with non-consensually shared imagery on these sites (Henry & Flynn, 2019). In her study of amateur pornography, Paasonen (2011) mentions that authentic imagery is often blurry, out of focus, and less well-lit. Although camera technology has developed profoundly over the last ten years, we observed the same tendencies across the sites. Some of the boys from the vocational school, however, also emphasize other evaluation strategies that help them determine the authenticity of the girl and the imagery. If the imagery is of "known" girls or shows the "Snapchat timer" in the corner, it is most likely "real". Those of them who admitted to secretly capturing imagery during their sexual encounters with girls furthermore men-

tion the importance of showing parts of themselves in the imagery, e.g., a foot or knee, to prove the authenticity. The contrast between the exhibiting of such male body parts lacking sexualized connotation and the highly sexualized focus of the exposed female body parts underline the asymmetric distribution of gaze and agency in the positioning of the male and the female in these scenarios.

This more everyday-like and private imagery is obviously interesting for the users, but pulling that privacy out of the watched objects is also one of the things that seems to make it fascinating. Furthermore, installing a presumed “slut” in the now no-longer-private body appears even more fascinating. The installation, this slutification, is repeated over and over in the conversations among the users. The young men keep reiterating a construct of female desire and activity as degrading for the person whose body it inhabits. If the female body does not obviously exhibit such desire, the young men and boys fantasize together about its existence. Through that construction, male sexual desire is simultaneously constituted as potentially dangerous and damaging – if male desire of female bodies succeeds in revealing a likewise female desire of male bodies, then the female is socially destroyed according to this construction. Slutification, as a shared fascination among the young men and boys, seems to nurture a much-cherished collective dream of themselves as dangerous and powerful. And the ability to hail and confirm that dream collectively seems to determine much of the value linked to the material they gather around. The intense gathering around such confirmation echoes Matthews and Channon’s (2020) point that certain arenas, such as sports, are spaces for holding back the tide that threatens to challenge male dominance and masculinity as a clearly defined privilege restricted to humans in male bodies.

A different but related aspect involves demonstrating the difficulty of gaining access to the bodies of the depicted girls. Pornography and prostitutes are easily obtained, these young men agree – money is all that’s needed. And those designated “sluts” are considered accessible to more or less anyone and everyone. But it can be a more demanding task to attract and access ordinary young women who become involved with young men for many reasons other than financial interest. Being able to attract ordinary young women can be an indicator of male performativity within hierarchies of masculinity and can earn the respect of male peers, as evidenced by the responses to those young men on the platforms that could prove their skills by recounting comprehensive collections of imagery from girls they had had sex with. The less accessible the girls and young women, the higher value the imagery is ascribed by the boys and young men. Nevertheless, the guy that gains access to explicit imagery of the bodies of girls and young women without their invitation or consent (and often without their knowledge) is also hailed and admired in these fora. He who transgresses the inconvenient boundaries and troubles the rules, bringing back imagery to share with others, can apparently also earn the respect of his peers.

The status of privacy is thereby continuously tested and debated in assessing the posted imagery and the internal status among the participants, and suspicions and doubts regarding a user's claims that the imagery they have posted is otherwise inaccessible, the search for any indication that his claimed transgression of well-guarded boundaries of privacy and integrity may be exaggerated, constantly haunt the exchanges among the young men. This suspicion and doubt saturates much of the conversation about "her" possibly being a "slut", "easy to get pictures from", perhaps someone that sells pictures or sells sex, and definitely a "cum bucket" already filled with the leftover excretions from numerous male genitals having masturbated on her skin and in her bodily openings.

### ***Bodies on the market***

However, there may also be another reason for the interest in determining the status of privacy in relation to the posted imagery. The social destruction of persons following the slutification of their female bodies entails that the subjects of these bodies are simultaneously pacified in relation to any negotiations of social norms and preferences that would position the subject as worthy of respect and, more importantly, as having a legitimate voice and legitimate agency in the social world they inhabit. Bodies that allow access for money are automatically positioned as unimportant in any other sense than that access; they are reduced to flesh and to objects to be used. If access has been bought or is considered something that can potentially be purchased, everything else about these bodies seems to fade away as irrelevant and non-existent. The important bodies, the bodies that might also have some kind of say or agency, a respectful positioning in the world, are apparently those that are not for sale. But the discussion among the young men keeps circling in on the possibility that even these bodies may have previously been, or someday will be, for sale, and what that might mean when evaluating their current status.

This distinction between bodies that are or are not for sale strikes a fine balance, entailing a range of different aspects. A few of the boys and young men at the vocational school explicitly confirm that "easily accessible imagery" – often imagery of women they deemed "whores" – is not interesting and is thus of lesser worth. To make this judgment, however, the boys and young men weigh several factors: the approach and effort needed to obtain the imagery of a girl; the amount of imagery of this girl that can be tracked down; and the way she otherwise presents herself, such as her ways of posing in imagery, the clothes she wears, or the size of her breasts. There is a particular focus on the approach and effort, and the boys and young men express how they enjoy "the play" and "the conversation" with the girl before receiving the actual image. The more difficult, yet possible, the better. Referring to a soccer match and emphasizing his own skills on the pitch, one of the boys professes that it is more of an achievement if one can obtain imagery from a girl who has a boyfriend: "that is like scoring a goal by beating the keeper, instead of just kicking the ball into an empty net". The boyfriend is, in this conversation, positioned as someone who has already evaluated the girl as "worthy" and taken up a

position between the goalposts in an attempt to keep others out. It is seemingly exciting to test his ability to do so as part of boys' and young men's negotiations of masculinity and male positioning.

As already indicated, much of the conversation among the users of online platforms revolves around whether it is necessary to pay to get access to (imagery of) female bodies, or if such access can be gained for free. Sometimes, it is almost as if gaining access without a monetary transaction introduces additional doubts – as if one cannot be quite sure about the nature of the act, the nature of the trade or exchange. Why would she get involved if not for money, they seem to wonder. Thus, although having free access might appear attractive, it is safer, less risky, if the girl seemingly giving free access to her body can nonetheless be positioned as “selling herself”, i.e., as being a “whore”. If she, her imagery, and the accompanying fantasies can be moved into the “slut category” – then her motives and imagined potential reactions and counter-evaluations of herself as more than a sexual being are pacified. By depriving the girl or young woman of meaning-making opportunities in these interactions, she is simultaneously disarmed in any social negotiations regarding her value, dignity, positioning, and ability to reject the approaches, appearances, unattractiveness, and the being and becoming of the boys and young men. The boundaries between sex and other social relations, between oneself as a sexual being and oneself as an ordinary boy or young man, are thus maintained. Classifying a girl as a “whore” is to confine her to the sexual domain, without any contact to other domains, and thereby also preserve one's own agency as divided between the filthy sexual domain and the respectable life outside this domain, and certainly surpassing her evaluation. On these male-dominated platforms, the designated “whore” is not a subject whose agency must be taken into account – she is reduced to an object for use in a clearly demarcated space.

Taking our reflections this way underlines some of the analytical trajectories for approaching and understanding what is going on among the platformed users and the boys and young men at the vocational school. Such analytical trajectories include attention to a discourse of sex as transaction or to a potential threat of being evaluated and found not worthy of female sexual attraction, or even to the wish to fence off one's sexual agency and desires, confining them to a specific domain inhabited by particular exemplars of the female human, while keeping these domains separate.

### ***Pornography as accessible language***

In one online conversation, a group of young men discuss if one should simply hand over one's entire collection of nudes and videos to the “brothers” on the platform, or whether some material should be kept to oneself. This discussion grows out of an outburst from one participant, who raises a question that seems to return every once in a while: “Seriously, do you jerk off to these shitty pictures?”; “These tits are really sad. Not worth looking at!” The other participants are taken aback. The images do not really imitate the tropes and postures familiar from commercial pornography that many forum users

expect. The young men who are in favor of sharing such images try to explain their value as something other than merely working to produce sperm ejaculations: "But! It's got something to do with these being leaked pictures of Danish girls"; "They are their pictures. They are not necessarily for jerking off!" The earlier remark from Scout-guy, who wrote of a girl that "She doesn't even know how!" is also relevant here. The postures and looks and expressions, the twists and turns and exposure of the female body must be performed in a particular way to work as expected and be considered legitimate within the domain that the boys and young men share.

In Amundsen's (2019) study of women's self-produced erotic pictures shared with their partners, she argues that sexualized imagery may have several purposes and meanings – and sexual arousal is not necessarily the most important among them; instead, through producing and sharing such imagery, "the women act as relationship workers who perform intimacy and trust to maintain their romantic and/or sexual relationship" (p. 484). For some women, showing vulnerability through sexualized imagery is a central part of producing love and romance in their relationship work (Amundsen, 2019). But for all this to succeed, a shared visual language is needed among sender and receiver. Given that pornography is widespread and generally used by both men and women, pornographic iconography and positions, storylines, language, and imagery constitute highly influential conventions in relation to eroticism and sexual practices. It is this visual language, provided by pornography that the young woman whom Scout-guy is so displeased with, that fails to speak sufficiently well – her posture, her expression, her bodily appearance do not follow the conventions through which Scout-guy makes sense of the imagery. When the pictures in our material seem too far removed from pornographic iconography, objections are often raised: "This is too boring"; "Come on, not interesting"; "Seriously? You cannot masturbate to this shit". Either this swarm of objections raises from the endless mumbles, or the community seems to become even more enthusiastic and intensifies the sexualization of the pictures by guessing names and hometowns, and discussing the status of the depicted as a "cum bucket", "hard to get", a "whore", or someone that "needs cock", "needs splitting in two". The wordings and descriptions used to degrade, objectify, and demonstrate their own dominance and agency are numerous.

These discussions about different interpretations of sexualized imagery and which kinds of images the boys and young men should or should not share with each other invited further reflections. Particularly interesting are the boys' and young men's considerations regarding matters of trust, intimacy, integrity, and whether they should share pictures of their girlfriends. Stub says: "Honestly, my point is that, if you are to sacrifice the pictures of your girlfriend, then, as a minimum, you should get something similar in return. Like, the girlfriend of your friend or of an old schoolmate ... I have OC [original content] of almost 30 women. And I would never share them unless I got a really good offer". SuckitDina replies: "But what if you didn't need to wait? What if everybody threw all 30 women up, then you all of a sudden had a folder with 600 different women

where everything was OC? Wouldn't your 30 women be worth it? Say 3 of them [other users] threw some shit in, then you simply remove them from the server and then all of a sudden you have a good core group of members that do not cheat!" Stub: "Never gonna happen!" Material featuring girlfriends is valuable – and some of the participants on the various platforms possess large quantities of this particular currency. They brag about it, but they also use it to subordinate other boys and young men and make them beg for it. Sometimes such imagery is unconditionally offered and the gratitude is strong; sometimes it is exchanged, but at a very high value; sometimes it is withheld, provoking a simmering envy and rage among other users. This is highly sought-after material – but not only as a masturbatory aid. It matters in the community because it is yet another way to mark one's status in the hierarchy of masculinity.

### Concluding remarks

The boys and young men engaged in posting, sharing, and evaluating platformed female bodies and sexualized digital imagery of young women and girls seem to find intense meaning in their shared activities. For some of the boys and young men, such imagery is a tool for masturbation, with some types of imagery more effective for that purpose than others. But mostly, the depicted female body seems to function as the object through which male participants negotiate their gender positioning as representatives of and belonging to a particular gender category within dichotomously demarcated boundaries between male and female. They seem dedicated to perform masculinity, maintain gender asymmetry, and secure their distance from the others – females – and reiterate the fundamental and absolute differences between the two kinds of human beings.

These young men negotiate and push and exaggerate and beg and comfort each other, they care and give advice with imagery of sexualized young female bodies as their shared matter and focus. They negotiate their own value as members of these male communities with their hierarchical engagement by interacting with each other through posts, the production of potentially shareable material, talking about the norms that they should apply when evaluating these female bodies, and by discussing their judgements, tastes, and ways of using the material. They are together in dealing with and navigating such matters and have different ways of a sufficiently aloof and distanced consumer mentality in this regard. For these boys and young men, the thrill seems to lie in getting close to the girls and young women as subjects and human beings through their imagery, but then transforming them into something else, destroying their agency and subjecthood, reducing them to "cunts" and "breasts", "whores" and "sluts", objects to be used and discarded – and thereby exhibiting and fantasizing about themselves as male and powerful and dangerous, strong and brave in their ability to transgress boundaries of all sorts. Meanwhile, these processes strongly affect the young women and girls depicted, who become objects of such abusive and violent assaults – not just once, but continuously,

as their imagery is reposted, reshared, and reevaluated (for analyses of these processes, see, e.g., Bates, 2017; Mortensen, 2020, 2021). However, this is something that seems to be given very little – if any – thought by the male participants in the online fora.

Despite all of this, the participants on such fora and platforms are quite ordinary young men and boys – or so it would seem based on the identities that are sometimes revealed in posts and the similar tendencies that we witnessed among the boys and young men at the vocational school. One interesting point is, therefore, that for those involved in such communities, this engagement with masculine identity formation seems to entail a capacity to shift register – to shift between practicing these distancing and objectifying relations to fellow human beings of female gender on various digital platforms and everyday analogue lives in which they encounter girls and young women as peers with whom one can work, study, talk, and laugh. With this capacity to shift and move between masculinities adjusted to the arenas and spaces they inhabit, the question of inter-linkages among these enactments of gendered positioning arises. How might hailing sexist condemnation of female peers and the platforming of their bodies as mere objects leak into everyday relationships and positionings in schools, families, and workplaces? Or, can these platformed experiences and positionings remain fenced off from everyday ways of relating, experiences, and positionings performed within masculinity repertoires of different kinds? While our study shines a light on some of the relatively uncharted and somewhat shady digital spaces that influence everyday discourses and ways of inhabiting the world among boys and young men, these questions should guide further exploration.

## Acknowledgements

The study was reported to the Danish Data Protection Agency through Aarhus University with the case number 2015-57-0002. Our approval from the Danish State Attorney carries the case number RA-2017-3200506-43.

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