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Teen girls, sexual double standards and 'sexting': gendered value in digital image exchange

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Postfeminist media cultures, gendered morality and 'sexting': Exploring the visual and affective economy of teen's sexual image exchange

This paper explores how young people experience the sending and receiving of sexually explicit content through mobile, digital technologies, drawing on focus group, individual interview and virtual ethnography data with 35 teens (aged 13-15) from two inner, multicultural UK schools. We develop a feminist analysis of 'postfeminist' media cultures which promote 'sexy' self-display, exploring how teen 'sexting' presents specific age and gender related contradictions: teen girls are called upon to produce sexually explicit images, yet face legal repercussions, moral condemnation and 'slut shaming' when they do so. The paper outlines the construction of gendered morality and value, sexual double standards and new norms of feminine and masculine desirability in the visual economy of the teen social network Blackberry Messenger. The affective dimensions of this visual economy are also mapped out, illustrating how explicit images of girls (teen peer produced content) circulated as a form of digital currency and value for boys who could accumulate 'ratings' by possessing and exchanging certain images. Girls in contrast largely discussed the taking or sharing of self-images as a site of potential risk, blame and guilt around sexual reputation (e.g. being called 'slut', 'slag' or 'sket'). The paper illustrates how online digital content and networks are inextricably linked to offline lives and experiences; and concludes by outlining the urgent need to address the gender inequity issues highlighted by practices of teen 'sexting'.

Keywords: teen femininity and masculinity, 'sexualisation', slut-shaming, digital images, social networking, Blackberry messenger

Postfeminist looking, 'sexualisation' and 'sexting': What's the problem?

The concept of 'postfeminism' helps unpack and critique a contemporary sensibility that positions society as 'beyond' feminism, where it is supposed that feminist goals of social and political equality have been met, making the need for feminism now obsolete (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Ringrose, 2013). Applying this concept to popular culture, research has explored how second wave feminist critiques of sexual objectification are overturned through what has been termed an increasing 'sexualisation of culture'. Here, self-objectification, particularly for girls and women, is re-interpreted not as oppressive but as constituting a prime site of sexual liberation, value and pleasure (Gill, 2007). This is evident across mainstream media, but particularly in shows like Gok Wan's "How to look good naked" (UK Channel 4), a program in which women are encouraged to perform a knowing sexual identity by displaying their 'naked' body using what researchers have called new 'technologies' of sexiness and 'sexualisation' (Gill, 2008; Evans et al., 2011). In parallel, we are witnessing the objectification and 'sexualisation' of men, through widespread consumption of images of the ideal male body, arguably resulting in a democratization of looking for women (and men) (Gill et al., 2005; Gill,2012). Web 2.0 has likewise provided a panacea for self-produced 'sexy' images through the advent of multiple formats to upload, share and distribute 'amateur' digital images and video, particularly through social networking platforms (Dobson, 2011).

Within this contemporary 'postfeminist' media culture, researchers have argued that the 'sexualisation' of the adult, particularly female body is, therefore, taken for granted, normal and banal (Atwood, 2009; Evans and Riley, 2011). Where these new norms and technological processes of visually imaging 'sexiness' appear to create widespread unease, however, is when age becomes an issue. Morality seems to clearly enter into the picture when children and teens produce 'sexualised' representations of themselves. As the sharing of self-taken, sexually explicit images of teenaged girls has grabbed the international headlines through myriad stories on 'sexting' the debate over sexual objectification versus sexual liberation gains a new twist.

Sexting is a 'portmanteau' term that combines the words sex and texting (Livingstone and Görzig, 2012: 151) and has been defined as "the creating, sharing and forwarding of sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude images" through digital technologies such as mobile phones and the internet (Lenhart, 2009). However, the fact that some of these images fall foul of laws on pornography (traditionally legal only if images of adults not minors) has amplified public anxieties over the sexualisation of childhood and girlhood (Arcabascio, 2010; Sacco et al., 2010; Wolak and Finkelhor, 2011). One unfortunate consequence has been interventions into 'sexting' by law enforcement agencies that often tramples on the subtle negotiation of rights, pleasures and pressures of adolescent sexual exploration within a technologically mediated and often ambiguous peer context.

Our interest is in this paper is in how a current international panic over 'sexting' hinges on several age and gender related tensions: First, the production and distribution of sexualised images (of women and men, girls and boys) is no longer restricted to major producers or

wealthy corporations. Second, sexualised image production once largely confined to adult society are visibly being practiced by teenagers and even children. Third, the means of effecting these shifts lies in the commonplace use of relatively cheap, portable and personalised technologies far more familiar to the younger rather than older generations, reversing familiar hierarchies of power and skill. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that sexting has given rise to widespread public and policy concern regarding the potential risks digital technology may pose to young people, ranging from general worries over early exposure to sexual or pornographic content, to sexual grooming (from adult strangers), and cyberbullying (from peers) (Hinduja and Patchin 2010; Sex and Tech, 2010) and sexual harassment (Mitchell, et al., 2012). But as suggested, our interest is in how children's 'sexualised' image production presents a fascinating contradiction: Young people are faced with a daily barrage of images of idealised sexy femininity and masculinity, yet they face various forms of recrimination, discipline and abuse when they produce these images themselves.

Indeed, penal and pedagogic responses to 'sexting' are particularly aged and gendered. Legal discourses have produced a particular narrative of teen girls at risk of self-exploitation and in need of criminal regulation (Karaian, 2012: 58). International anti-sexting campaigns (a form of public pedagogic discourse) have positioned 'sexting' as a problem affecting young girls who lack vigilance in their uses of social media. The media has tended to dramatize this theme of under-age female risk, with extreme stories of sexting 'gone wrong' (consider for instance the recent tragic case of Amanda Todd in Canada, where an image of her bare breasts, circulated without her consent, was connected to years of cyberbullying and ultimately her later suicide). E-safety campaigns, including Australia's 'tagged', Canada's 'Respect yourself' and the UK's 'Exposed' work in concert with these media forms, producing particular gendered 'sexting subjects' (Karaian, 2012). For example, 'Exposed'[1] tells a story about a girl putting herself at risk by sending an explicit photo; it does not scrutinise the cultural sexism that normalises the coercive, unauthorised showing and distribution of images of girls' body parts. The implicit message in this and other anti-sexting narratives is that responsibility for an image lies with its producer/sender not its receiver, resulting in a form of victim-blaming (Hasinoff, 2012) that illustrates what commentators have called 'slut shaming' (Albury, 2012). In consequence, strict moral boundaries around girls' (but not boys') age-appropriate sexual expression are re-drawn through efforts to prevent sexting practices (Renold and Ringrose, 2011).

Not only, then are discourses of 'sexting' risk aged and gendered, they reproduce moral norms about sexual subjects, constructing girls' sexuality as a particular problem to be surveilled and regulated. Concerns around 'sexting', thus dovetail neatly with the wider social concerns explored in this special issue around girls as the main victims of 'sexualisation' and related social harms (Tankard-Reist, 2009). The idea that self-sexualising through sexting images puts girls at moral risk of exploitation works through the age-old sexual double standard that not only positions girls' sexuality as something pure and at risk of contamination through active desire (Jackson and Cram, 2003) but also positions girls as

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[1] 'Exposed' was produced by the UK's Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ovR3FF_6us, last accessed 28/12/12.

responsible for protecting the virginal body from hard-wired aggressive male sexuality (Holland et al., 1998).

Re-examining teen sexting practices and the construction of gendered value and morality

In this paper, we seek to intervene into these complex debates on gender, age and 'sexting', drawing upon findings from a UK qualitative, interview based research project on children, young people and 'sexting'. We develop a feminist lens to critically analyse how young people themselves interpret and negotiate gendered discourses of morality about sexuality through their uses of mobile digital technology, especially social networking. Rather than simply reducing the issue of sexting (and sexualisation) to one of age-appropriate sexuality ("just wait till you're older!") our aim is to inquire into underlying 'gender inequity' in constructions of teenage girls' sexuality (Tolman, 2012), interrogating the on-going 'sexual double standards' (Jackson and Cram, 2003) facing girls within popular 'postfeminist' media cultures (Vares et al., 2011; Ringrose and Eriksson-Barajas, 2011). To this end, we draw upon feminist media studies theorists Beverly Skeggs' and Helen Wood's (2005; Skeggs and Wood, 2012) work on the formation of gender, class and race classifications in popular culture. Recently developed in relation to audience reception of reality television, Skeggs' arguments can be applied also to social media. She argues that visual representations must be contextualisd within classed, racialized and moralizing economies of looking, and that images are judged "according to the symbolic values generated by [exchange] processes" (2005: 965). The moral values generated through visual culture enable class, race, gender, and sexual positionings, creating binaries around ideal versus abject bodies. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari (1984) Skeggs (2004: 12) suggests that one of the central ways morality and value attribution occurs is through 'inscription' of the body. Skeggs also argues we need to combine an analysis of exchange as a regulative process operative through inscription with explorations of *affective* relations and how value is attributed but also how resistances to inscriptions might work (Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

In relation to teenage sexting practices, this leads us to ask how the capacity to generate value from images is grounded in dominant gender and sexual discourses and affective relations in social networking practices. What particular formations of femininity and masculinity are idealised in the peer group, how are these negotiated and are there ways in which they are resisted? Our focus is on gendered bodily inscription – the norms that construct an ideal sexed body through particular gendered and sexual markings which capture the body. Building on an account of how the body is captured through 'postfeminist' gender discourses produced in young people's digital social networks (Ringrose and Eriksson-Barajas, 2011), we explore young people's emotional 'investment' in particular gendered, classed and racialised discourses in order to understand how their ambivalent "affective reactions" may relate to their social positioning (Skeggs and Wood, 2012: 155) and, furthermore, how they may both reproduce but also disrupt dominant gender norms in their everyday technologically mediated relationships (Ringrose and Renold, 2011).

The nature of 'sexting' depends not only on cultural practices but also on technological affordances. Social networking sites enable the construction of a textual and visual cyber-subjectivity that gains meaning through embedding in a digitally 'networked public' (boyd, 2008; Papacharissi, 2009). Researchers exploring gender dynamics on social networking sites argue that the very architecture of the sites encourages visual, bodily 'objectification', with intensified forms of rating and comparison commonly practiced in relation to women though also found in the online 'gay' community (Manago et al., 2009; Siiback, 2010; Dobson, 2011). Indeed, Facebook's very genesis as 'Facemash' shows how a commercialised digital culture based on visual images can promote hierarchical ranking, competition and stereotyping of female bodies through techniques of visual comparison, resulting in thorough-going gendered "affective dynamics of looking" (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013: 126).

Other technologies have been far less researched, however. This article focuses on peer interactions conducted via Blackberry Messenger (BBM). BBM smart phone technology has become extraordinarily popular among UK teenagers for its cheapness (at, during the research period, five pounds per month for unlimited messaging) and its operation 'under the radar', being very difficult for parents to oversee or for even the provider to monitor (compared, say, with the efforts Facebook maintains to 'police' what is posted upon it).

Research methodology

Most research on youth sexting has been quantitative, measuring its prevalence and demographic characteristics (Mitchell et. al, 2012; Livingstone and Gorzig, 2012). Surveys have found highly variable rates of sexting, depending on just what is being measured (Lounsbury, Mitchell, and Finkelhor, 2011), although USA, UK and EU research suggests that typically around 15 per cent of teenagers report sending or receiving sexual messages while only some 3 per cent admit to creating or sending nude images (Lenhart, 2009; Livingstone, et al, 2010). Far less is known about the contexts and consequences of sexting as a social, cultural or digital practice (Willard, 2010). Our qualitative study explored *everyday* sexual communication among young people as mediated by mobile phones and the internet.

The research was conducted in two inner-city, multicultural schools in the UK during 2011. Having negotiated access to the school, and gained research ethics approval, the (female) interviewers[2] worked with children aged 12-13 (UK Year 8) and 14-15 (Year 10), inviting them to reflect on both present and earlier experiences since the start of their secondary education (which in the UK begins around 11 years old). Our multi-method design integrated focus groups and follow up individual interviews with 35 young people, together with an analysis of their online posts on Facebook and Blackberry (for details, see Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone and Harvey, 2012). Although the number of schools selected and children interviewed is modest, we were able to build sufficient rapport to gain a deep insight into a diverse range of practices, including: posting body photos on Facebook and Blackberry, broadcasting sexual pins through Blackberry, asking and being asked for photos and collecting photos. Specifically, we followed McClelland and Fine's (2008) 'intensity

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[2] The two interviewers are both referred to as 'I' in the data excerpts throughout the paper.

sampling' where we focused on demonstrative cases to explore the 'sexting' experiences in depth.

Previous youth and new media research reveals that young people are deeply attached to digital communication and technology and find digital flirtation and sexual communication pleasurable, exciting and fun (boyd, 2008; Livingstone, 2008), a vital part of the 'drama' of the peer culture (Marwick and boyd, 2011). Hence, we asked the young people to 'walk us through' some of their mobile phone and Blackberry exchanges including flirtation and image exchange. Our starting point was the recognition young people are sexual beings with a right to communicate in privacy so as to explore their sexuality, intimacy and relationships (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009). But what we found through our discussions with young people was a blurring between pleasurable and coercive dimensions of digital sexual communication that troubles any straightforward conclusions regarding empowerment or exploitation.

Social networking, value and girls' bodies

BBM Pin Broadcasts and describing girls' bodies

While Facebook and other applications can be accessed on Blackberry, the most popular social networking platform operated by Blackberry smart phones is Blackberry Messenger (widely called 'BBM' by teenagers). Contacts are added by circulating a pin number together with a description to the user's friend network asking them to add the contact: this is called a pin 'broadcast'. When the receiver of the pin broadcast accepts the pin, they gain that contact and see the person's profile including their default profile photo. The description linked to the pin is an easy way in which pin broadcasts encode sexual and gendered discourses, as discussed by this year 8 girls' focus group:

I: Okay, so what did people say about you when they do a broadcast?
Cherelle: They say, 'Stop what you are doing, add Mercedes, she's gifted; that means pretty and stuff like that. Yeah stuff like that and 'she has good conversations'.
I: Okay, is it mostly about your appearance?
Cherelle: Yeah mostly about appearance when it comes to broadcasts.
I: Okay so tell me exactly what they would say?
Cherelle: If it is a boy and a girl told a boy to BC their pin then they will say, 'Oh she has big tits and a big bum … and if you get to know her, she's nice'.
Mercedes: Like add this chick, she got a back off.
I: What's the back word?
Mercedes: Back off. That is a big bum.
I: So that's a good thing?
Cherelle: Yeah, it is what they are like expecting in girls. It is like good features.
Mercedes: Yeah, like their dream girl is probably like a big bum, nice breasts and long hair and like a nice skin tone.
Cherelle: Or she's a nice brownie, lighties are out of fashion. And a person would broadcast it about someone else.

Mercedes: She broadcasted my pin and said, 'Ah a back like you wouldn't even believe it'
            …
I: A girl wrote this about you and who did she want to add you?
Mercedes: I don't know. She was helping me.

As this exchange illustrates, there is a sense of camaraderie for the girls around 'bigging up' one's friends as attractive and desirable, the goal being to 'help' a girl to get more primarily male contacts, often from those not already known in person. Mercedes noted that after the "back off" pin broadcast, 40 boys "added her". 'Tits and bum' are the prime bodily properties, and these operate in racialised and classed ways. Four of the five girls in this focus group were Black, and it is clear that a nice 'back' and light skin tone is critical in determining attractiveness, although the comment that "lighties are out of fashion" suggests a moment of resistance. As boys explained further, it is mainly girls' bodies that are described in this way: "I don't really see the point of doing it to boys. It's just you say, 'oh you're a really good mate' you wouldn't describe them" (Rashid, year 8). However, he adds, the benefit of such descriptions of girls includes generating an interaction that enables going 'a step closer in the friendship.'

Being asked for a 'special photo': a new norm of feminine desirability?

After people add someone via Blackberry Broadcasting, they become 'friends' and can see the person's default photo. This then allows them to request additional photos. As Jodie (13) explains, this may require some strategizing on the girl's part if she is to participate in the game while avoiding its risks:

> Some boy asked me, 'Can I have a picture of you'. I was like, 'My display picture' and he was like, 'No I mean a special photo' and I was like, 'What special photo' and he was like, 'Like you in your bra' and I was like 'No', and I was like, 'I have one of me in my bikini'. And he was like, 'Can you send it anyway' and I was like, 'Victoria's got it' because he knows my cousin. And them two went to the same school, so I was like, 'You can ask her to send it' and then I was like, 'Victoria, delete the photo and don't send it to him'…

The ambivalent pleasure of being asked for photos by new contacts is part of the ritual of BBM communication and here Jodie has come up with a ruse to avoid sending the photo. She recounted another similar scenario on BBM moments later, this time inventing a financial impediment:

> He was like basically he was flirting with me [on BBM] and he was like, 'You're mad buff you know' and I was like, 'No I'm not' and he was like, 'Yeah you've got a nice body shape and a pretty face'. 'Now you are just gassing to yourself' which means like you are lying. And he is like, 'No way [inaudible 22:10] then he is like, 'You're boom', which means you are pretty and I was like, 'No but thanks' with a kiss face and he got a hug face. He was like, 'Have you got a boyfriend, babes?' I was like, 'Yeah'. 'He's a lucky man to have someone as

special as you' and I was like, 'I'm not special'. He was like, 'I think you are really special, babes', and I was like, 'Oh thanks' with a hug face and he was like, 'No problem' with a hug face. And then he was like, 'Oh you are so cute' and I was like, 'You are random' and he was like, 'You are really buff, man' which means like pretty, and I was, 'I'm not' and he was like, 'You are, can you send me a picture' and then I was like, 'No I don't have any credit to send you it' and stuff and then he is like, 'Yeah it's free over BBM' and I was like, because I'm on contract it costs me money. And he is like, 'Okay then'.

Indeed, she is full of defensive strategies – here is a third:

I: Okay, so then you do have a boyfriend now?
Jodie: No, I don't have a boyfriend… But when people ask me if I have a boyfriend, I know if I say no, they are going to start flirting and everything so I just say yeah anyway.

Affectively, these exchanges are recounted with pleasure. It appears to be a major compliment to be asked for photos, but girls must also become proficient in dealing with the consequences of sending them or not. As Jodie explained, whether she did or didn't send a photo she ran the risk of being called a 'sket': "Like, when you say no to people, like you fall out with them, so I just make excuses." These practices of negotiation are interesting beyond whether a photo is actually sent. Jodie would lie outside the 15 per cent of young people shown by surveys actively to engage in 'sexting', though she is certainly *negotiating* digitally mediated sexual relationship practices.

Indeed, since girls must negotiate moral discourses regarding their sexual reputation, and being attractive and wanted, when deciding whether to send images, this suggests a new norm of feminine desirability as mediated (though not determined; Buckingham,2008) by the affordances of digital technology. Specifically, it is taken by girls as a sign of their attractiveness to be asked for a 'special photo', just as there is a matching norm of desirable masculinity for boys to be able to negotiate the 'ask' for the photo. While this replicates the familiar sexual double standard of female passivity and male action, the social implications are now altered because the affordances (boyd, 2008) of sexting include persistence (images once sent cannot be withdrawn or deleted), manipulation and uncertain audiences (they may be further edited or circulated), and even possible illegality (if sexually explicit).

Getting 'ratings': performing masculinity through the visual proof of image exchange

Both boys and girls talked about a system of 'ratings' in which boys gained respect for being involved in fights, being popular with girls, having 'swagger' and wearing designer clothes – all part of an ideal, culturally specific expression of masculinity (Archer and Yamashita, 2003; see also Harvey et al., forthcoming). One way boys could gain ratings was by collecting, tagging, sending and showing pictures of girls' bodies, particularly their breasts.

Pictures, 'screen munches'[3] and posts could all be used as 'proof' of boys' ability to chat to girls and negotiate access to seeing their bodies. Tarek (Year 10) explains:

I: So …what kind of stuff do you chat about?
Tarek: I just like talk to her. Say like, 'What are you doing?' and stuff. What year are you in? What school do you go to? Then just tell her yeah, I tell her to send me a picture of her, like I tell her to send a picture of her breasts, but… I don't think she took it, I think she just sent me one that she had recently. Because sometimes girls will save them and just send them and everything. But it wasn't a raw one, it was one with, I think…just the top on.
…
Tarek: Yeah, sometimes yeah. Girls will say, 'Nah I don't want to'. Sometimes they will say, 'Yeah I'll do it later' but they won't do it. Mmm.
I: And do they ever say, 'Well, alright send me a picture of you with your top off' or whatever?
Tarek: Yeah, sometimes they do it but I never do it.

Tarek explains that while he asks for pictures he never sends ones of himself. Also having an image specially made for you is better than being sent one 'on file', so to speak. Acquiring images is seen as a part of a game of negotiation, as we saw in Jodie's account, evidence that you can get a girl to "do it" (send the image). Another participant, Kaja (also year 10) explains similarly:

I: And what are they – like, what is like the purpose of keeping them all?
Kaja: Don't know, they are just on my phone. But I don't watch them unless I am showing someone.
I: So, like, you have got them on your phone and so that is just so that you can say, 'I've got 30 pictures on my phone'?
Kaja: Kind of, like say other people they are like 'Oh I got this girl to do this', I will be like, 'Look at my phone'…
Kaja: Say if I got a popular girl to do it that looks like one of those girls who wouldn't do it then it would make me look even better.

There is value for Kaja in *showing* the visual currency and proof of the images to his friends, revealing his popularity and power. He adds that a picture has greater value the more popular and therefore less likely a girl is to send it - gaining a scarce image demonstrates his own powers of persuasion or desirability. Recall Skegg's (2004) deployment of the concepts of use-value and exchange-value as we map the multiple ways that value flows through these images in a heterosexualized, affective economy of flirting: an image can be exchanged or looked upon by others, and it proves that a boy is himself both desired and desirous.

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[3] Screen Munch is a blackberry application that according to its website allows you to "~~capture~~ munch your Blackberry screen and keep it forever" muck like the 'print screen' function on windows. http://www.screenmuncher.com/

Negotiating images contributes to a peer hierarchy where boys and girls stake out positions in the popularity ratings. Kaja (year 10) and Kamal (year 8) both talked about having 30 images on their phone, indicating a considerable degree of popularity and desirability:

I: So you have got, like, 30 of them. So then do you go to your mates, 'Look at this, I've got 30 pictures.'

Kamal: No. I go, 'I've got bare pictures of girls here' and then when they say, 'How much', I will tell them how much but I won't really show them.

I: You won't really show them?

Kamal: No, I will show them but like where they will like hold my phone and look at it and try to go through the next ones which might have a girl's face in it, for example, I won't let it out of my possession.

I: Oh right. So you wouldn't like want them to know who the girl was?

Kamal: No. Not unless the girl wanted me to let them know.

I: Okay. What other situations would there be where you would want them to know who the girl was?

Kamal: I wouldn't want them to know who the girl was because like I would only do it for someone I didn't like and I wouldn't have a picture of someone I didn't like, so yeah.

Part of the performance of masculinity here includes what Kamal describes as a kind of masculine code of honour of not revealing the faces of the images of the girls he's been sent, although this possibility is potentially open to him, as explored next.

Respect vs. 'skets': inscribing girls' bodies with shame

The affective dynamic of acquiring images of girls' bodies means the boy becomes the holder of something of value that the girl has done for him. Whilst a girl may gain value from being asked, as we saw with Jodie, once the image passes out of her hands to the boys it is understood as a type of reward, which the boy can abuse or not. Both girls and boys read the production of images of girls' bodies through hierarchical codes of gendered morality. These girls in a year 10 focus group worked hard to distinguish respectable girls, who would not admit to sending a photo (or, indeed, to having sex) from 'skets' – girls who do not respect themselves:

Irina: But most girls who do that and send the pictures they already have had sex or will do it or are ready to do it, yeah. It is like, you know, skets as in, like, they will give some random one to anyone and they show off their body.

…

Alexandra   basically a sket is someone who like doesn't hide the way that they go about and have sex with everyone else.

Irina: And we respect ourselves.

…

Irina: I think I have like respect for myself. Like, I'm not really bothered to get attention from other people, like I wouldn't be like posting my naked pictures on my – I wouldn't even take naked pictures, because I think that is very stupid.

Kylie, also in year 10, explains:

> Basically with the boys it is a competition, who can get the most revealing picture or the biggest breasted girl or basically them pictures are just a competition and the girls send them as like, 'Oh if you go out with me we could probably have sex or I could do stuff'… Demi, she is in Year 8, she looks about 18, she has her hair bright blonde with pink tips in the front. Her belly is always hanging out, she has got her belly done [pierced], her tongue done, she has got here [below lip] done. Always got spray tan, she has always got like really revealing stuff like leggings with holes down the side… like she don't really care what she looks like… one of the boys had a picture of Demi on their phone, but like Demi's older brother come down to the school and like completely went mental, he was like, 'Take that off your phone now'. But the thing is you can't really have a go at the boy putting it up when she sent it to him. She was like, 'Oh put this as your DP' [default photo]. So it is sort of like – I don't defend boys yeah because of what they do at times, they exploit girls and that, but if a girl is telling you, you can put this picture up if you want and then sends it, then obviously the boy is going to like – because she is one of the most popular girls with all the boys. It is like, if I have got a picture of Demi, it is like they have completely won the competition.

What Kylie calls 'a competition', we have analysed as contributing to a hierarchical economy of looking and desiring in the school culture. Her account of Demi includes signifiers of sexual value ('belly hanging out', piercings, 'spray tan', 'really revealing' clothes) that are also highly classed, linked to 'trashy' femininity (Duits and Van Zoonen, 2006; Bragg, 2012; Egan, 2013; Jensen and Ringrose, 2013). Thus, in this account, the creation and sending of sexual images mark the sender's body as having less value within dominant norms of classed and racialised femininity. The images, and the discussion of the circulation of them, play a role in the moral regulation of classed, gendered and racialised bodies within our participants' peer networks. And although Demi's brother seems to attack the boy who keeps such photos, Kylie still attributes moral responsibility primarily to the girl who sent them, notwithstanding her critique of boys' behaviour also. Other year 10 girls argued similarly:

Irina: I think it is the girl's fault most of the time. They shouldn't be taking the pictures in the first place.
Indigo: And then the boys make it worse by spreading it.
Carey: The boys don't really care.
Alexandra: No, but if you don't want to get exposed you don't take it. Like if you are going to have sex with your boyfriend you don't pictures of it or videos of it or stuff like, and you don't talk about it to other people.

Irina: I don't really mind if they take naked pictures it is their business. But if you are going to take naked pictures at least send it to someone whom you trust, not some random boyfriend that you have been going out for a week.

…

Irina: I think they both are guilty, the girl and the boy. She shouldn't have been taking the pictures in the first place and then be stupid enough to send it to people.

I: What about the example where you said like maybe the guy even took the picture? What if that happened?

Carey: Well that is his fault –

Irina: I don't know – For [the girl] being like that so he can take a picture. It is just being stupid enough to post it on Facebook. I mean –

Indigo: For boys if they have sex with a girl, they are like, ooh they are sick, yeah.

Rebecca: But if it is a girl then they are a sket, yeah.

The discussion points to a sexual double standard - boys are 'sick' (a current term of admiration in the UK context) if they are seen (through photographic evidence, for instance) to have sex whereas the girls who send images are 'skets'. Though both boys and girls are criticised, only the girls are called 'stupid' (repeatedly so by Irina). Indeed, even if it is the boy who takes the photo, a girl *should not be in any position where he can take a picture.* Again, responsibility falls to the girl for constructing a morally suspect image.

The sexual double standard also means that, despite asking for images, many boys also categorized girls who send photos as 'sket' or 'slag', as illustrated by year 10 boys:

I: So if you get a picture like that, does that like get sent round?

Tarek: Yeah, it gets sent round, and you show it to someone and say, 'Hey look I've got this pic' and they go, 'Oh yeah, she's a slag - I rate you for that though' they rate you ((laughter))

I: They were what?

Tarek: Oh I don't know how to explain it, they will rate you

Danvir: Respect you more,

Tarek: They'll respect you more they will give you more respect.

Danvir: They'll be like oh look, look

I: So you get respect but she gets called a slag?

Danvir: Yeah they'll be like oh look what you are capable of doing, making a girl take a picture of her breasts and give it to you and stuff.

I: You reckon it is [inaudible 20:27] so she would write… your name on this?

All: Mm, Yes.

I: So is that like always what people do?

Malik: Not always,

Danvir: Not always but sometimes they cut off don't take a picture of their face because some people show it around.

Tarek: They don't take a picture of their face. They turn the picture grey, I don't know how they turn the picture grey, but they cut their face off.

As before, boys get 'rated' and 'respect' for asking for an image and girls get called 'skets' for supplying it. In competitive game of exchange, the boys use BBM to send requests for girls to write his name on their body, and the best image would win (and become his default photo). Kaja (year 10) talked about a variation of this game - being tagged in a Facebook image of a girl's cleavage with his name written on it:

Kaja: Some girl, she is like 18 or 19 she wrote my name but she tagged my Facebook…
            she put the picture up and tagged me. But she is from far, like, she has no shame.
            I don't even know where she lives, she says she lives far.
I: So does it matter if she tags you? Is that like good?
Kaja: I don't really care. It is nothing that I ain't seen before.

Girls inscribe their cleavage with a boy's name, marking an inscribing their bodies as 'property' of particular boys, and 'tagging' allows the boys to claim value from the picture when posted online. As Kaja says, the girl who did this has 'no shame' (a moral marker about her sexuality) while he himself both claims value from the picture and affectively disclaims it (and her) as 'nothing I ain't seen before'. He adds, later, of an older girl who sent him a picture with 'have sex with me' and another boy's name on it on her breasts, "But girls like this I wouldn't love. I don't know why, I just wouldn't love. I wouldn't have respect for them…It might sound rude yeah but girls like that…I would just have sex with her and then leave her. I wouldn't want to – I would talk to her, but I wouldn't get in a relationship with her."

While such sexual double-standards are hardly new (Jackson and Cram, 2003), the technology provides new ways for value to circulate through images, becoming materially marked on particular bodies as part of that process. Interestingly, Kaja moves easily from positioning girls who send pictures as not respecting themselves to explaining that he wouldn't respect them. Affectively, the image itself becomes shameful as it associates the girl with promiscuity, although this shame can also 'travel' or affectively spread to him for engaging with the image, hence Kaja's complex work to distance himself from implication of relationship with the girl (Kofoed and Ringrose, 2012). Both images and comments can be understood in terms of subjectifying technologies that repeatedly mark the boundaries of acceptable sexuality for girls and boys. Thus girls find themselves hiding sexual interest and desire (Tolman, 2002, 2012) while boys' sexual interest and even aggressive, harassing propositioning is normalised as part of successful masculinity.

Linking up: online meets offline

In addition to negotiations over image exchange, images can gain a further use-value for boys insofar as they imply 'linking' - 'real' sex in the offline world:

Laura: How does like all this sending of pictures and stuff relate to like having sex and doing stuff?

Tarek: Because if a girl sends a picture to you it means that probably she wants to meet up with you and stuff.

So, photographic evidence of sexual promises or, indeed, practice gives value (ratings) for boys in relation to their peers. Of particular value for their sexual ratings would be the acquisition of images of sexual acts being performed on them. Year 8 girls in one focus group discussed how a boy in their network currently had an image of a girl's head above a penis as his BBM default photo. Whether the penis was really his or "taken from other websites," and concern that one could be taped by boys provided the focus of considerable debate, as apparent in another year 8 focus group:

Milan: you have a photo of it on your phone and like it has been sent around the whole school and then that person who gave that person the blow job -

Gazelle: Is going to get labelled for the rest of their life. And all the boys go up to her and ask her for a blow job.

Claire: There is this girl, yeah, she gave a boy in year ten a blow job and he said if she didn't give him another one he will spread it around. And now everyone knows and she started crying. So she made it kind of obvious.

I: What do you mean she made it obvious?

Gazelle: By crying. So everyone knows that she done it.

The moral logic presented here is that, firstly, the girl is responsible for having performed the sexual act and, secondly, she has implicated herself by getting upset. She is doubly condemned.

Young people also navigate the possibilities of 'linking' up with (physically meeting) a little known or unknown new contact through BBM. The girls were very aware of 'stranger danger' (Guo, 2008), and some found requests for sexual acts if they 'linked' threatening. Still, they were inclined to suggest that other 'stupid' girls might meet up with guys but they wouldn't. As Cherelle (year 8) explained, she was not like some girls who would go to a guy's house and 'beat' (have sex). Here she describes getting rid of a contact when he became nasty:

> A boy, he said 'Oh you're pen' - that means, oh you're pretty and stuff and
> 'where do you live?' I said [area in city]. They said, 'Oh I live in [same area]'.
> 'Okay so what school do you go to?', they said (school) and then he was all like,
> 'Oh do you want to link?' I was like, 'Maybe' and he said, 'What would you do if
> we linked?' and I said, 'I dunno' and then he said, 'Oh would you give me blows,

that means suck my dick?' and I was like, 'No not really' and then he said, 'Why?' and I said, 'Because I'm not like that', but he became furious…I ended up deleting him.'

Cherelle went on to say that she didn't want to make that type of guy 'angry', and that being asked
to 'beat' and give blows on BBM was happening 'everyday':

Cherelle: they will say, like 'There's nothing wrong like all you need to do is just suck on it' and I will be like, 'But I don't want to do that' and just keep going and put the angry face on BBM and dedicate their status to you in a negative way.
….
I: So is it just like a joke that, you ignore now or?
Cherelle: It is not a joke because boys get really serious because they just get really angry at the time and say, 'Do it, there's nothing to it. Oh you are pissing me off, I know where you live you know' and they will try for it in any type of way even if they don't even know you.

Here Cherelle's refusal on BBM to 'link up' or engage with banter around 'blows' seemed to threaten the boy's masculinity, at which point he 'became furious'. Cherelle deleted the contact, but she was left with the affective residue that this contact 'knows' where she lives; and with BBM requests happening daily at school she was adamant it was 'not a joke'. In such scenarios, the online and offline spheres become difficult to separate, and the potential exists for the situation, legitimised through moral sexual double standards and performances of aggressive masculinity, to threaten girls' safety and well-being.

Conclusions: Addressing the gender inequities of teen 'sexting'

> *"The moral existential effort required to do anything with the experiences available via media technologies has to come from other sources - ultimately from within the situated lifeworld" (Tomlinson, 1999: 204)*

We have sought to move beyond sensationalist discourses of age-inappropriate sexting risks for teen-aged girls, arguing that what is most problematic for young people are the contexts of gender inequity and sexual double standards that they must negotiate as part of their everyday online and offline experiences. The use of digital technologies, here Blackberry Messenger in particular, compounds these challenges by inscribing a gendered morality onto girls' bodies, literally and virtually, within young people's digitally-mediated peer cultures. This extends the reach of long-established gendered power relations according to which girls' bodies are configured as implicit bearers of sexual morality (McClintock, 1995), and is made all the more persuasive through the fit between the affordances of the technology and the nature of peer culture – ambiguous in form yet able to produce competitive values, playful in style, yet harsh in its normative judgements.

Sexting images carry value for boys and girls as part of the heterosexualized visual economy in peer networks, and this works in gender specific ways. Akin to adult 'postfeminst' media cultures, being asked for an image of one's body carries value, even constitutes a new norm of feminine desirability, within today's digital peer networks. Meanwhile, for boys, acquiring images can work as proof of their desirability and access to girls' bodies, constituting new norms of masculinity and masculine performance. However, consonant with familiar double standards, both boys and girls and girls described girls who sent images as 'skets' who lack self-respect. Images of girls were found to have exchange value for boys, contributing to their popularity or 'ratings' because they could be collected and shown to other boys. But they simultaneously mark out the girls' bodies as devalued, carrying a range of affects and working to delimit the acceptable boundaries of desirable female sexuality. Consequently, for girls to acquire 'respect' from both boys and girls means engaging in a complex performance of femininity where they gain value from being asked for images but have to be seen to resist sending images and deny the possibility of having done so, projecting this culpability onto 'other' stupid girls.

It is critical that we grasp the implications of these practices in terms of their consequences both online and offline. Whilst presenting a version of this paper in the USA, a member of the audience was horrified by the residual effects of images of girls' breasts being circulated, exclaiming, "But what if the girl wanted to run for Congress?" It seems that even in the academy, as in policy and educational responses to 'sexting' (noted at the outset of this article), it is easier to accept the wider 'postfeminist' social context of sexism, sexual double standards and sexual regulations, in which girls' are called upon to perform particular sexual scripts and images, and yet run the risk of their bodies and sexualities being marked as shameful (slut-shaming), than it is to contest it (see also Ringrose and Renold, 2012). Arguably, the consequence is a double victimisation, as girls are silenced from reporting to adults the problems they face in school and out of school settings for fear of being blamed or punished further.

Consequently, we conclude by pointing to the urgent need to address the gender (in)equity issues highlighted by practices of sexting. In relation to e-safety campaigns, we observe that while 'stranger danger' (against which most children have now been warned) remains a rare threat, everyday girls' concerns about consequences of gender and sexual inequity in popular and everyday culture go largely unheard at school and home. Young people can delete unwanted images or block certain peer contacts but must still deal with gendered power inequalities surrounding sexual reputation and new performative displays of ideal, desirable masculinity and femininity. Because the relationship between fun, pleasure, flirtation and coercion is often ambiguous and complex, pedagogic interventions should be equally sophisticated. It is especially important to disrupt the gendered and aged discourses of 'sexting' risk whereby teen girls are called upon protect their innocent virginal body from the predatory over-sexed male. Nor can we simply demonize boys; rather we need to understand the performative pressures of masculinity and femininity in the digitized peer group (Koefed and Ringrose, 2012; Harvey et al., 2013). As advocated by Lerum and Dworkin (2009), we need resources that offer practical and ethical ways to challenge and overturn the sexual

double standard whilst empowering both girls and boys, considering the sexual health and pleasure of all young people as a matter of rights and equalities. In this spirit, we would like to close, therefore, with a critical feminist question that begins to disrupt the taken for granted moral hierarchies through which digital images are being understood in the contemporary context: What would it mean for us to live in a world where girls could unproblematically take, post or send an image of their breasts to whomever they wished?

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