The Currency of Images: Risk, Value and Gendered Power Dynamics in Young Men's Accounts of Sexting

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary gender relations among young people by taking young men's experiences with and understandings of 'sexting' as a case in point. Based on a focus group study with university undergraduate men in Melbourne, Australia, we analyse what is seen as having value and what is seen as constituting a risk when engaging in sexting, and how this is perceived as different for men and women. We demonstrate how value and risk are closely intertwined in the focus group discussions and how the body is central in the production and negotiation of both these dimensions. This is made particularly clear in the two 'figures' that participants described as embodying the perceived risks; 'the creep' and 'the slut'. This paper illustrates the ways gendered bodies and sexual value are central to the ways 'double standards' operate in sexting and persist in contemporary gender relations.

Keywords:

Sexting; young men; gendered risk; value; bodies

Introduction

In this paper we examine contemporary gender relations among young people through a critical discussion of young men's experiences with and understandings of 'sexting', i.e., the sending and receiving of sexually explicit images or texts (or 'sexts') (Jessica Ringrose et al. 2013). Based on a focus group study with young men, we analyse what is seen as accepted and valued and what is seen as risky or compromising when engaging in sexting. As we will show, the discussions in the focus groups demonstrated the young men's awareness of gendered and sexual 'double standards' that impact young women negatively. However, we also saw the persistence of individualising discourses (Jennifer F. Chmielewski, Deborah L. Tolman & Hunter Kincaid 2017) and traditional gendered power dynamics in shaping the expectations, norms and sanctions that young men associate with sexting.

Sexting has been approached from a number of fields such as health, legal studies, education, and media studies. Like other sexual activities, sexting is embedded within a gendered narrative in which girls are understood as more likely to be asked to send sexually explicit imagery (and do so), while boys are more likely to receive and forward these sexts (Jessica Ringrose et al 2012; Emily Setty 2019). Mainstream anti-sexting educational awareness campaigns, for example, have tended to leverage a 'media risk discourse' in which harms associated with sexting position "girls [as] lacking vigilance in their uses of social media, and boys as predatory and over-sexed" (Jessica Ringrose & Laura Harvey 2015, 206). These narratives are typically "used to justify the regulation of girls' (but not boys') sexualities" (Carla Rice & Erin Watson 2016, 146).

A range of sociological and feminist research has aimed to critique and unsettle these risk discourses in various ways. These include exploring the perspectives and understandings

young people themselves have of sexting and ‘sexualised media’ (Kath Albury & Kate Crawford 2012; Amy A. Hasinoff 2014; Steven Roberts & Signe Ravn 2019); the ways teenage masculinities are constructed and embodied through digital media technologies and the sharing and hoarding of sexual images as capital (Ringrose and Harvey 2015); how young women perform contradictory femininities in relation to (hetero)sexuality (Emma Renold & Jessica Ringrose 2011); and through placing a specific focus on image content, context and the meanings associated with particular body parts (Ringrose & Harvey 2015, Rikke Amundsen 2018). Taken together, these studies contribute an important analysis of the specific meanings of bodies and body parts as socially mediated through digital image sharing beyond discourses of risk only and explore the complex, affective and embodied dimensions of these processes. This paper advances this literature by exploring the currency of ‘sexting’ images with a particular focus on how value and risk are closely intertwined. More specifically, the research question guiding the paper asks what is constituted as having value and posing a risk, respectively, and how such risks are sought managed, according to young undergraduate men. We focus on young men – in contrast to teenage boys – as their voices, with very few exceptions (e.g., Antonio García-Gómez 2019), are often missing from research on sexuality (Laura Harvey & Jessica Ringrose 2015), and on sexting in particular. We illustrate how the body is central in the production and negotiation of both value and risk, and we show how the currency of images rests on contemporary gender power relations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs the analysis in the paper draws on three different strands of feminist theory. First, we draw on Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) concept of the heterosexual matrix of desire as key to understanding the dynamics by which gender assembles through sexting in this study. This concept is widely used to illuminate the ways in

which ‘intelligible’ gender identities are composed and continuously performed through reference to dominant and normative conceptions of heterosexuality. In short, it is a way of addressing the significance of heterosexuality to binary notions of sex and gender, meaning that sex, gender, sexual practice and desire must all be aligned and correspond to one another for an individual to be seen as culturally and socially intelligible. Using Butler’s performative understanding, gender is an effect of “repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1990, 45). We use this as a framework to explore the nuanced dynamics of gender as they play out in this study of sexting where the normative expectations for ‘men’ and ‘women’ as binary categories are strong. We map these expectations in relation to the body and the interplay between concepts of bodily ‘value’ and risk, and how these accord with gendered power relations.

We combine this with insights from affective and embodied feminist sociological approaches to explore the significance of the body for understanding the ways in which value is generated and sexting ‘risks’ are framed. We argue this is important for understanding how gender is not merely passively inscribed on the body but actively produced through the body (Julia Coffey 2016; Shelley Budgeon 2003; Rebecca Coleman 2009), through the practices and affects associated with sexual image-sharing, as well as the discourses of dominant gender relations such as the heterosexual matrix of desire. Indeed, we view the body as active in producing social realities and processes, rather than passive or ‘dumb matter’ which is then inscribed with socio-cultural meanings (Coffey 2016; Budgeon 2003; Coleman 2009; Renold & Ringrose 2011). Gendered subjectivities are then understood as performed and produced through the body, through engagements with not just discourse (as Butler focuses on) but also images, norms, ideals and others’ bodies. This move to go ‘beyond discourse’ (Jessica

Ringrose 2011) stems from efforts to understand the 'messy realities' of young people's lives by also including a focus on the embodied and affective dimensions of subjectivity. Such embodied and affective dynamics of heterosexual appraisal, reward, and shame (Ringrose & Harvey 2015) are crucial for understanding the 'rules of the game' associated with sexting, as well as the gendered relations of power which frame how sexting is understood by the young men in the study. Furthermore, these dynamics play into the constructions of different bodies and body parts as carrying different meanings; meanings that have implications for what the body can 'do' (see e.g., Ringrose et al. 2013).

Lastly, we draw on feminist scholarship on value, respectability and its opposite, stigma. As our analysis shows, different bodies and different body parts carry different value in the digital 'market place' that sexting comes to constitute for our participants. The significance of the body is a widely-noted feature in postfeminist culture – "less for what it can do than how it appears" – and the links between "femininity, self-transformation and the body (are) key to understanding the interplay between gender and subjectivity in the neoliberal era" (Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff 2017, 24). In this context, the body's appearance becomes the key locus of value in ideal feminine subjectivities (Elias et al. 2017). As Beverley Skeggs writes in her work on value, capital and neoliberalism, market logics permeate increasingly more aspects of our lives and "we become the living embodiment of capital" (2014, 2). In our study, the sexts/images that are exchanged come to represent this embodiment, although their meanings are not necessarily determined from the outset. Hence, different body parts not only carry different meanings; these meanings are normative and hierarchically ordered. Skeggs also links value and 'having value' to 'being proper', or in other words being 'respectable' (Skeggs 2004). These distinctions between proper and improper are crucial for understanding the ways risk and value relates to gendered body parts

in sexting, and how these are accorded differently in relation to the (male) ‘creep’ and the (female) ‘slut’ as stigmatised figures which fail to adhere to the complex and pernicious gender norms underpinning sexting. Indeed, drawing on Tyler and Slater’s (2017) critical work on the ‘sociology of stigma’ we want to highlight the gendered power dimensions involved in the reproduction of such norms. We pick up on this latter point in the discussion. By combining these three approaches we become able to engage with our research question in an elaborate manner. Before we move on to addressing this, we briefly outline the methods and data in the study.

Methods and Data

Our research sought to explore prevailing masculine norms pertaining to sexting and gender. Accordingly, we employed a qualitative focus group design with groups consisting of existing friendship networks (Louisa Allen 2005). We conducted ten focus groups between October 2016 and July 2017. Participants were recruited via flyers on physical and digital noticeboards, informed about the study over the phone and given a plain language statement to read before signing the consent form. The participants, 37 men, were aged 18-22 and were undergraduate students studying a variety of subjects across Arts, Social Sciences, Technology, and Physical Sciences at two large universities in Melbourne, Australia. In all but one focus group the men identified as heterosexual, with two men in one focus group identifying as gay. Most identified as White Australian, though four were international students: two from the USA, and one each from China, Ireland and England.

Participants’ names and other identifying characteristics such as programme of study have been anonymised. The study followed conventional ethical guidelines for social science research, sought written consent and promoted the need to respect others’ need for

confidence beyond the room. The men were given a $30 retail voucher for taking part. Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee granted this research ethics approval (project no. CF16/1398-2016000763).

The focus groups, which were audio recorded, lasted between 1hr 10 minutes up to two hours, with an average of 1 hr 35 minutes. The focus group discussion followed a discussion guide covering definitions of sexting; the relationship between sex and sexting; the norms for (non-consensual) sharing of sexts with third parties; sexting experiences, perceived gendered dynamics and differences and broader representations of sexting and risk. To facilitate discussion, we used a set of stimulus material consisting of images sourced from the internet that were suggestive of 'sext conversations'. The examples included content that might variously be perceived as comedic, aggressive or ambiguous and participants were asked to discuss how they perceived these and whether the examples constituted sexting.

The focus groups were moderated by the male author. The dynamic and very rich discussions that emerged about sexting and related intimate experiences among groups of friends could have resulted from the gender correspondence between researcher and participants and the perceived smaller social distance this implies. The moderator was also able to use his familiarity with social media and youth (popular) culture to create an informal atmosphere in the focus groups.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data coded thematically. For the purposes of this paper; to explore notions of value and risk, we coded the data for 1) the 'value' of different bodies/body parts, 2) perceived risks for men and women and 3) risk management. After going through the coded material and realising how part of the sexting risks crystallised

into two gendered images, we added a sub-code on 'sluts and creeps' to the risk code, and coded the material for this. All three authors discussed the codes and all took part in writing up the analysis, aided by the conceptual framework introduced above.

While our study is qualitative in nature and therefore not representative, the focus group methodology enables us to adopt a 'middle position' (Bente Halkier 2017, 407) between localised knowledge and broader socio-cultural understandings. That is, participants are drawing on socially recognisable discourses when negotiating and making sense of their own experiences (Deborah Warr 2005); for example, 'the creep' and 'the slut', which operated as recognisable tropes throughout the focus groups. This means that without claiming generalisability, we suggest that the broad patterns here would resonate with young people elsewhere.

Analysis

The analysis is structured in three parts. First, we explore how different bodies – different shapes, different body parts and different genders – are seen as having different value. We then consider the perceived gendered risks associated with sexting and how such risks may be managed. Lastly, we further examine the gendered power relations informing different reputational risks that men and women face which participants defined through the figures of 'the creep' and 'the slut'.

Bodies and value

A clear theme in the data was the different expectations for bodily appearance for men and women. These differences are central for understanding what has currency in sexting, and hence how value is produced. As the following quote illustrates, men are considered to not

have to be “God-like” while women are understood as being pressured or expected to have “perfect tits and arse”:

> Martin: Social image for a girl, like honestly if you go through Instagram, girls are just talking about their bodies all the time, or trying to portray the body that they have. I think, bodies for girls are a huge thing, but for guys it’s not a massive issue, but it still is an issue. I mean, I’ve seen girls that are literally so skinny, going “I’m so fat.” And they are a hundred percent certain that they’re fat for some reason.
> Jerry: Anorexia mainly resonates with white females, versus men. So if you also look at society and the way that they look at girls, being skinny and much more focused on their bodies than guys. I mean, guys definitely have an ideal to be fit and strong, but it’s not the same, they don’t have to be ‘God-like,’ as opposed to having perfect tits and a perfect arse or whatever.

As the quote illustrates, women were seen to be under more pressure to have, and display, perfect bodies, not just in relation to sexting but generally. Managing the body’s physical appearance continues to be imperative for women since worth and value is accorded in line with a heterosexual matrix of desirability (Susan Bordo 2003; Budgeon 2003). This does not mean that body image is irrelevant to young men. As the next quote demonstrates, the participants agreed it would be less embarrassing if a naked photo of them circulated on the internet if they were “buff”:

> Harrison: If you had more confidence, you’re probably going to be less embarrassed about your nudes being leaked. If you’re a fat old guy… let’s just say I’m a really fat old guy, really ugly, and I take a nude and it gets out, I’m probably going to be far

more embarrassed, than if I'm a young stud, really athletic, attractive… it's probably still embarrassing, but it's not the same.

Moderator: What about if you're young and you don't have a six pack? And you're not buff. Is that potentially more embarrassing, you think?

Harrison: It could be.

Lyle: For sure. It would be more embarrassing than if you were sculpted.

Having a "sculpted", muscular body was presumed to enable men to be more confident about their appearance, and less embarrassed if a nude photo of them was "leaked". This demonstrates how men are not immune from appearance pressures, particularly in a cultural context which places more emphasis on the physical display of masculinity through muscularity than perhaps ever before (Coffey 2016). However, most men did not recognize the potential for their own bodies, or those of other men, to be sexually appealing through sexting images – certainly not in relation to their sexual organs. As another participant said, "girls don't want a picture of a dick, but guys like, unless they're gay, they like pictures of boobs". Torsos of 'rigged' or toned men were agreed to have greater sexual appeal for women than 'dick pics', yet men's torsos were not seen to be sexualised in the same ways as an image of a woman's naked torso because of the sexual associations of women's breasts. As Harvey & Ringrose (2015) describe, visible breasts in sexts are taken as a playful way of signalling sexual intentionality. However, there are strict regulation for young women around the display of body parts which delineate the 'how' and 'when' sharing of "innocent breasts" and "full-blown vaginas" is acceptable:

> Evan: Girls have different levels of sexting that they can partake in? Like, it's pretty bloody hardcore if you're sending a dick pic, whereas breasts are more innocent to take a photo of and send it, as opposed to a full blown vagina picture.
> Theo: Yeah, that's the other thing, I feel like there's a massive difference between sending your boobs and your vagina…

'Vagina pics' and 'dick pics' were held at parallel levels of 'intensity', as being "pretty bloody hardcore" and usually signalling a level of sexual forwardness deemed distasteful or transgressive, particularly for women (more later). As Ringrose and Harvey (2015) have argued, the affective intensities associated with images of girls' bodies combined with discourses of reward and shame serve to materialise gender differences which regulate girls' sexuality. Hence, what emerges is both an intensified sexualisation and regulation of women's bodies compared to men.

In the focus groups, a logic of 'value' in the sexual appeal of women's bodies was a constant theme, as women's bodies and body parts were described as inherently possessing more 'value' than men's. Such notions of value were clearly framed by dominant heterosexual and binary understandings of gender and bodies as discrete, essential categories which naturalise and legitimate differential and unequal treatment. This is visible in the quote below:

> Lyle: I'd say girls' nudes… well, I wouldn't say… because of how guys are, they're more valued I'd say. That makes it sound like it's a trade of things, but like, I'd say more value is put on them, you know how teenage guys are. Some of them just don't have morals or ethics or that sort of thing.
> Harrison: You'll find that a lot of people [guys] just don't really care.

Lyle uses a trade or market metaphor to describe the increased value associated with (nude) images of girls and relates this to existing heterosexual power relations; it is “how guys are”, even though both he and Harrison try to distance themselves from this logic. The different value ascribed to gendered bodies in sexting images is significant for understanding both the ‘rules of the game’ (who sends what and when; see Roberts & Ravn 2019) and the perceived ‘risk’ differentials. The female body’s perceived higher value also renders her more vulnerable, for instance through ‘revenge porn’ or non-consensual sharing of images. This is unpacked in the following:

> Wayne: Yeah I suppose female pictures get shared more than males. In my experience.
>
> Jacob: I think that the reason for sharing is different, because if you’re a female sharing pictures, then there’s more to send. There’s going to be more photos. If you’re a guy I feel like there’s less that you can show, if that makes sense. You can’t really take different angles, but if you’re a girl then there’s a lot more that you can do, so there’s a lot more photos that they would be sending I feel...Which obviously increases the amount that they can be exposed.
>
> Moderator: So if you did a torso shot as a guy, torso to face, that’s different for a girl I guess. And therefore, is the risk less?
>
> Jacob: Yeah, for a guy the risk is less.
>
> Wayne: I think the main anxiety about it being shared, is just from the fact that no one wants to share a guy’s photo.
>
> Dean: Yeah actually, no one wants to.
>
> Moderator: So you mean both guys and girls don’t want to share photos of a guy?

Wayne: Yeah, no one wants to see that.

Jacob: Yeah I think it's easier for a girl's stuff to be shared because there's a universal interest.

Continuing the market logic from above, participants argued that women's images are more valuable in accordance with broader socio-cultural norms or the "universal interest" in consuming imagery of women's bodies as women's different body parts are sexualised to a greater extent than men's. This means that there is "more for women to show", and more of a 'market' for sharing images of women. This demand for images of women's naked bodies and body parts, however, also makes them vulnerable to risk because their images are expected to be shared by (other) men[i] more broadly. This logic was used to explain that women's bodies are more vulnerable to being 'exposed' or shared between men without the sender's permission due to the inherent desirability of women's sexual images. Other groups agreed, saying "there's more hype about naked girls than naked guys", and this would mean that "people are more likely to share a photo [without her permission] of a girl, more than they are a guy".

Individualising Risk

This section offers our analyses of the perceived gendered risks and ways in which these can be managed. While the young men generally acknowledged a power imbalance, some implicitly endorsed it by placing the responsibility with the sender, as this quote shows:

> Moderator: Okay, so going back to risk, why is it risky for… you say women get pushed into it more, but what are the risks?
>
> Brad: Because if guys like us do show our friends…

Theo: Which we do.

David: I think it's unrealistic to think that a guy is not going to show his friends.

In this extract, women are seen as "unrealistic" or naïve to think a sext is for the sender only. While this sentiment was echoed in some focus groups, the majority of the participants simultaneously emphasised the importance of consent and trust (see Roberts & Ravn 2019) and stated that they themselves would not share a message intended for them only – although most claimed to know of 'other' people who would do this. While distancing themselves from sharing practices was in part due to respect for the sender of the image, it was also a way of maintaining the 'specialness' of the person as being only 'for them'; a dimension we return to below. At the interactional level, such 'othering' served to present themselves as 'respectful' young men and not appear as morally problematic in the eyes of the moderator.

The centrality of individualised strategies in managing the inherent risks of sexting were emphasised throughout the focus groups. Commensurate with influential contemporary neoliberal impulses where "emphasis remains with individuals to maintain and manage their own well-being" (Julia Coffey & Juliet Watson 2015, 193), self-responsibility featured strongly in the men's accounts:

Jacob: If you're sending something like that, regardless of whether you're a male or a female, you can't complain if it ends up online.
Wayne: Yeah, because you put it there.
Jacob: You can be upset, but you knew the risks. Or you should know the risks. Anything that you send, anywhere, is out there.

Rather than emphasising the responsibility of the receiver to act ethically, sexting was framed in terms of obvious risks that the sender should know of and bear in mind. In this, the individualised logic of risk translates into victim-blaming. This is taken up in the next quote, which expands upon the expectations of the sender:

> Jim: I suppose it's kind of, you've got to understand the person before you start communicating with them online? It's also like, that's where I think there's a lot of risk involved.
> Leon: Yeah if you don't know where the lines of the relationship are… You can't be a hundred percent sure, but you have to have an understanding of where you are in terms of a relationship, friendship, whatever it might be.
> Simon: That's the thing, like, as a female, if you sent out a picture of yourself to a male that you don't really know or trust, I think it's your own stupidity that gets you into the trouble if he sends it to his mates and then his mates have it. That's just stupidity at its finest. You can't be that naive and ignorant to the fact that this bloke could not be nice.

This quote illustrates how women are expected to not only understand the inherent risk of sending a sext and be aware that the receiver "could not be nice", but also understand the broader situation by reading "the lines of the relationship", when engaging in sexting. Ultimately, most men across all the groups depicted sexting as an act of risk-taking that required great awareness, and not being aware of these risks was seen as "stupidity".

Even though most men agreed that it would be highly embarrassing if a 'dick pic' of them was shared online, their discussions suggested that this was not necessarily fatal:

> Miles: I feel like as guys we have less kind of, risk though.
>
> Guy: I don't know about that man, if my dick was plastered all over the internet and everyone was like, "look at this fucking idiot," like,
>
> Miles: 'Plastered over the internet', haha
>
> Warren: Yeah, you've just got to own it.
>
> Guy: Yeah that's me with my two inches…

The humour in this example suggests images of men's 'dicks' can be read as potentially funny if they are shared on the internet, and that this can be 'laughed off' rather than be devastating to their reputation as was seen to be the case for women (more below). The consequences of such exposures were also described as being lesser for men than for women. For example, one participant described a guy, whose 'dick pic' was widely shared at school, who was able to "cope with it and move on" rather than "needing to change schools". This speaks to the vastly different implications of exposure that stem from the gendered systems of value underpinning the framings of women's and men's body parts in sexting. Accordingly, in the remainder of the analysis we explore how participants' discussions of men and women being subjected to different 'risks' related to sending sexts, illustrated through the figures of 'the creep' and 'the slut'.

Gendered Sexting Figures: The 'Creep' and the 'Slut'

In the focus group discussions, two different 'figures' (Imogen Tyler 2013) emerged as the stigmatised or 'abject' identities that non-respectable sexting practices might result in:

Liam: Because there's the greater risk of slut shaming, as opposed to creep shaming, if we're going to coin a term here.

Matt: With body image and stuff like that, girls are more harshly judged I think as well.

Karl: Yeah, a girl who gets with a lot of guys is a slut, but a guy who gets with a lot of girls is a stud.

In the context of heterosexual relations, participants saw men's sexting as involving the risk of being seen as a 'creep', where women face the risk of being a 'slut'. As the quote pinpoints, the men were acutely aware of the gendered double standards framing sexuality that depict this as embarrassing and shameful for women and heroic and impressive for men. Tyler (2013) uses the term 'figure' to describe groups that are "fetischistically overdetermined and publicly imagined and represented (that is, figured) in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways" (Tyler 2013, 10). Definitions of the figures of 'the creep' and 'the slut' were readily available through the public imaginary and were discussed by participants throughout the focus groups.

Being perceived as a 'creep' was associated with a predatory or aggressive form of male sexuality such as sending 'dick pics' either unsolicited or 'too soon'. The risk of being seen as a creep then informed how and what the men ask for from women when sexting:

Moderator: So even asking [as opposed to sending] is a risk?

Jim: Yeah.

Liam: Because if you don't know someone well […] and you ask them, "Send me such and such," they could so easily be like, straight into [their friends'] group

> chat, “This guy just asked me for like sexual images or whatever, I don’t know him, what a creep.” And as soon as they send that, their whole school thinks you’re a creep. That’s a reputation that you’ve got.

Concerns about ‘reputational damage’ was a theme repeated throughout the focus groups and the quote illustrates how reputational damage spreads as rapidly as the shared image, escalating from involving one person to “their whole school”. The social stigma of being “that creepy guy” has very material consequences, with sexting ‘success’ in the sense of further consensual sexual interaction considered beyond the reach of creeps, not just in the immediate encounter:

> Liam: Given that you’re trying to get some sort of sexual connection with this person, you wouldn’t want to compromise your chances further, by having them think that you’re some massive creep.
>
> Karl: Or compromise your chances with other people.
>
> Liam: Yeah true, because they could pass on that information.

As the quote demonstrates, being labelled as a ‘creep’ has reputational implications, most notably as a potential barrier for a man’s future sexual success. Later in the same discussion, Matt explained that a creep “lacks a solid grasp of social norms”, and Liam emphasised how “successful [sexual] outcomes” cannot be achieved by creepy behaviour. Hence, the men depict the ‘creep’ as both ‘deviant’ and as failing (heterosexual) masculinity which is premised on the capacity to attract and engage sexually with women (Janet Holland et al. 2004).

While some participants, as demonstrated above, were critical of heterosexual double standards framing expressions of sexuality, the participants often ended up defining women who are ‘too forward’ or ‘overconfident’ in sending sexts through the figure of the ‘slut’.

> Matt: If a guy’s more forward with a girl, they can be perceived as creepy or whatever, but girls that are more forward are seen as more confident.
> Tim: The guy would be seen as weird for not getting on board with it.
> Moderator: Do you think there’s any risk that girls get slut shamed in this kind of thing?
> Karl: Yeah, it could almost be seen as overconfidence, if you send that straight away?
> Moderator: So would that turn you off? Would that overconfidence be something that you were wary of?
> Tim: You could be afraid that they did that to every single person that they met, so it wouldn’t be special for you.
> Matt: You automatically attach a certain perception of that person, so if it was a girl sending that for example, you’d think, “I wonder what sort of person she is,” type thing.

While Matt and Tim start out suggesting that forwardness and confidence in women is positive and that men should “get on board” with this, the group discussion introduces a fine line between positively valued confidence and negatively valued over-confidence. While overconfidence in men may shut off communication and in that sense “ruin the chances”, women’s overconfidence puts not only their reputation, but their entire identity in doubt, making the men “wonder what sort of person she is”, as Matt says. Again, clear

(hetero)sexual double-standards are at play in defining and framing the gender power relations and expectations here. Young women then need to more carefully balance these double standards and not only consider how they sext but how *many* they sext with.

It is important to note that several participants attempted to grapple with these double standards. In the following example, Harrison in particular argues against the expectation that women should regulate their own sexuality more than men. However, over the course of the discussion, he comes to re-evaluate this viewpoint:

> Moderator: […] is it good if a girl messages you and starts to initiate sexting?
> Harrison: Why should men have to do it every time? As I've said, I've only been with my girlfriend, but I would imagine that I would think that it would be fine. I don't see an issue with it.
> Moderator: What about if a girl had sent a vagina shot, quite near the beginning of a conversation, and ups the game? Ups the ante really quickly. Does that put you off?
> Lyle: I don't think it's bad at all. But like, society in general, frowns upon girls who are like, promiscuous, whereas the guys can be as promiscuous as they want. But yeah, I don't think there's anything wrong with that.
> Moderator: So it wouldn't put you off if a girl sends a vagina shot fairly quickly?
> Harrison: Although, if it's the first thing that she sends you… I'd be like, hang on, what's going on here? Maybe she's a bit unhinged or something. It's not normal.
> Lyle: It does make you ponder like, how many other guys has she done this to?

In this quote, the participants engage critically with "society in general" and gendered norms around sexting and heterosexual double standards in particular. They emphasise gender equality in terms of who 'goes first' and sexual activity generally. However, this is complicated towards the end of the quote, when Lyle and Harrison agree that there are circumstances where women's sexting can be seen as indication of them being "unhinged", thereby reaffirming the norms policing women's sexuality they were initially trying to refute. This demonstrates the persistence of traditional gender norms regarding sexuality; specifically how young women's sexuality is positioned as "something innocent, pure and at risk of contamination through active desire" (Harvey & Ringrose 2015, 307). It also suggests that these norms are rigid and difficult to challenge. The gendered and sexual politics of sexting are further unpacked in the next extract, where another group is discussing the hypothetical situation of receiving an unsolicited sext from a girl:

> Guy: Could you really assume that you're so special, and she'd be like, "this guy is so hot, I have to send nudes"? You kind of assume that it's happened before.
> Warren: But still, I feel like there's a lot of that with guys where they feel that, but I don't really view promiscuity as a problem anymore. I know a lot of guys who will lower a girl's value sexually if she's been with a lot of guys, but I feel like that's definitely shifting, because guys are starting to be like, well if I could I would, so how can I blame her, for being promiscuous, when if I was in that same situation, I would be exactly the same, if not worse. Well not worse but…

Here, Guy is suspicious of the idea of a woman being so attracted and sexually aroused by a man that she just '*has* to send [him] nudes'. He instead positions the sender's motives as indicative of her sexual experience, something that 'has happened before', compromising the

sexual appeal of the image. Ultimately, this quote indicates that the men see girls' sexts as sent with the intention to make them 'feel special', rather than being an expression of the sender's own sexual desires. Sexts should be 'special for you', as Tim said in a previous quote; ideally they make the (male) receiver feel special by showing something other people have not seen. An unsolicited sext is likened to a 'gift' that carries specific value depending on the shape of the body and the intensity of the image; however, the value of this 'gift' is rendered almost worthless if the sender is not 'pure'. This resonates with Setty's (2019) study when a participant describes a sext from a desirable girl as being "like a gem" that loses value once she "gives it away" (2019, 591). Here, value is shown to be double-edged and can be easily turn into 'slut shaming'. While in the quote Warren positions men who are critical of women's sexual forwardness as hypocritical and argues that contemporary gender relations are shifting, this stance is not dominant in the sample.

Discussion

We have analysed how different bodies and body parts are accorded value, and how these different dynamics of value are central in producing the gendered risk discourses framing sexting. These risks were shown to operate at an individualised level and not only encompass embarrassment and shame, but also reputational damage, as analysed through the figures of 'the creep' and 'the slut'.

Our findings accord with recent sociological analyses that highlight the significance of the body and differently-valued body parts for understanding the dynamics and harms of power and gender relations at work in sexting. Yet, our analysis contributes a deeper understanding of how value and risk are closely tied together in contemporary neoliberal gender relations. The greater value attached to images of women was mirrored in a 'universal interest' in

women's sexual images. This aligns with the dominant power relations formed through the heterosexual matrix of desire in which women's value more broadly is related to their capacity to appear attractive to men as "the body's appearance [is] the key locus of value in ideal feminine subjectivities" (Elias et al. 2017, 24, see also Ringrose et al. 2013, Chmielewski et al 2017). However, as we saw, the norms and value associated with femininity and women's bodies in these gendered power relations result in substantial risks associated with using their body parts as currency in sexting. Indeed, the market logic and language of 'demand' was often used to explain and legitimate or excuse men's non-consensual sharing of images. This market logic also mobilised individualising responses to women's increased risks of being 'exposed', with women positioned as needing to 'be aware' of this demand. In other words, the men consider that in sending a sext, the sender (in these cases, women) should be aware of the risks this involves and cannot blame anyone else if the sext ends up elsewhere. This is in accordance with the heterosexual matrix of desire in which women are positioned as being morally responsible for protecting their own bodies and reputations from aggressive male desire (Harvey & Ringrose 2015). This understanding not only involves an individualisation of risks that ignores any potential for a critical engagement with the underlying logic of the sexting 'market place', but also illustrates how far we still are from 'ethical' and respectful practices in actual sexting relations in this context (see also Hasinoff 2012).

Our analysis showed that while both men and women experience pressure around bodily appearance, and that both men and women may risk negative consequences if their images are shared without their consent, the implications are unequal. This became apparent when we unpacked the highly stigmatised figures of 'the creep' and 'the slut'. The creep played a central role in the young men's discussion of sexting, featuring as an 'other' that they

repudiated. This indicates that unsolicited ‘dick pics’ or moving forward too fast were not normative practices. Instead, the appropriate way to sext was to proceed on the basis of consent, reciprocity and careful, incremental steps. This is particularly interesting given that “there is a tendency to position heterosexual men’s sexuality as clueless and predatory, with no scope for alternative understandings” (Andrea Waling & Tinonee Pym 2019, 10; see also Chris Beasley 2015). The figure of the creep serves as a mechanism or self-technology for the young men to regulate their own sexting behaviours and ensure that their own ideals and practices are premised on avoiding going ‘too far’, ‘too fast’ or being ‘too much’. Contrastingly, the figure of ‘the slut’ served other purposes for the young men in this study. The slut was closely tied to exchanges in the sexting ‘market place’ and in that way related to questions of value. Women who come across as ‘too sexual’ risked not only compromising their value as potential partners to men, but also condemnation and forms of ostracism and abuse (Latina Y. Bay-Cheng, Anne E. Bruns and Eugene Maguin 2018; Fiona Attwood 2007); they not only lost their sexual value in the market place but also their moral value as ‘failed’ individuals. For women to have ‘value’, they must be seen as ‘respectable’. As Skeggs notes, “to become respectable means displaying femininity through appearance and conduct” (Skeggs 1997, 102). The figure of ‘the slut’, then, is also inscribed in a classificatory system of gender power relations and can be seen as a stigmatising label that serves “as a means of formal social control” (Erving Goffman 1986, 139, in Tyler & Slater 2018, 729), i.e. control of women’s sexuality as subordinate to men’s. This was clear in the discussion of sexual double standards, in particular surrounding women’s ‘specialness’ and it demonstrates that to be attractive women must be seen as ‘pure’ (Ringrose et al. 2013).

It is also worth paying attention to the different affective economies of these two figures. While both are shameful to inhabit, they evoke different reactions from other people. Hence,

the creep is imagined evoking discomfort and potentially fear amongst women, the slut evokes disgust amongst the young men in the study. Tyler writes that "when we approach disgust as symptomatic of wider social relations of power, we can begin to ascertain why disgust might be attributed to particular bodies. Disgust is political" (Tyler 2013, 24). The fact that being 'too sexual' can lead to such reactions for women, but not men, suggests vast differences remain between sexual norms for young men and women.

Feminist critics of an increasingly sexualized culture have highlighted the amplified pressures young women face to perform more highly sexualized femininities, including sending sexually explicit images (Albury and Crawford 2012). Such pressures, and the management of punitive associated risks, are highlighted by Renold and Ringrose as part of a "schizoid postfeminist culture" (Renold and Ringrose 2011). Sexting is a practice through which the young men were negotiating their sexual subjectivities, mediating discourses of heterosexual masculine desirability which call them in as knowing sexual agents. Whilst we saw a number of attempts to voice support of women's rights to sexual expression by criticising traditional sexual double standards, the discussions also showed how women's sexual subjectivities continue to be much more tightly policed than young men's within narrow framings of purity and innocence. The analysis illustrates the ways gendered bodies and sexual value are central to the ways 'double standards' operate in sexting and persist in contemporary gender relations.

This paper contributes much-needed insights into young men's experiences of sexting as a central part of (youth) sexual lives. Whilst our study is limited to a group of male university students in one metropolitan area of Australia, further comparative research is needed to explore how sexting is understood and negotiated across other settings and between different

groups of young men. Further research is also needed to explore how the value/risk sexting nexus is understood and negotiated by young women.

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[i] Whilst no participants described having shared sexts without the sender’s permission, this practice was discussed in the focus groups. While it was generally framed as problematic, and participants distanced themselves from this, it was also seen as something that would naturally continue to happen within a ‘boys will be boys’ discourse. For more on this, see (Author XX).

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