



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

Feminist Theory

14(3) 305–323

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DOI: 10.1177/1464700113499853

fty.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article explores gender inequities and sexual double standards in teens' digital image exchange, drawing on a UK qualitative research project on youth 'sexting'. We develop a critique of 'postfeminist' media cultures, suggesting teen 'sexting' presents specific age and gender related contradictions: teen girls are called upon to produce particular forms of 'sexy' self display, yet face legal repercussions, moral condemnation and 'slut shaming' when they do so. We examine the production/circulation of gendered value and sexual morality via teens' discussions of activities on Facebook and Blackberry. For instance, some boys accumulated 'ratings' by possessing and exchanging images of girls' breasts, which operated as a form of currency and value. Girls, in contrast, largely discussed the taking, sharing or posting of such images as risky, potentially inciting blame and shame around sexual reputation (e.g. being called 'slut', 'slag' or 'sket'). The daily negotiations of these new digitally mediated, heterosexualised, classed and raced norms of performing teen feminine and masculine desirability are considered.

Keywords

Blackberry Messenger, digital images, Facebook, 'sexualisation', slut-shaming, social networking, teen femininity, teen masculinity

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Postfeminist looking: 'Sexualisation', gender, age and 'sexting'

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' (Attwood, 2009).¹ 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 programme in which women are encouraged to perform sexual confidence and self-esteem by displaying and photographing their 'naked' body using what researchers have called new 'technologies' of performing feminine sexiness (Gill, 2008; Evans et al., 2010). In parallel, we are witnessing increased objectification and 'sexualisation' of men, through widespread consumption of images of idealised 'sexy' masculine bodies (Gill et al., 2005; Siibak, 2010). Web 2.0 has likewise provided a panacea for self-produced 'sexy' images to circulate through the advent of multiple formats to upload, share and distribute 'amateur' digital images and video, particularly through social networking platforms (Dobson, 2011).

Outlining this contemporary 'postfeminist' media culture, researchers have argued that the 'sexualisation' of the female body is, therefore, taken for granted, normal and banal (Evans et al., 2010). Where these new norms and technological processes of visually imaging feminine 'sexiness' appear to create widespread unease and moral outrage, however, is when 'under-age' teenagers produce 'sexualised' representations of themselves, positioned in the UK as a teen 'sexting epidemic'.² As the sharing, posting and distributing of sexually explicit images of teen girls, in particular, has grabbed the international headlines through myriad stories on 'sexting', the debates over postfeminist sexual objectification vs. sexual liberation and agency gain new twists.

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: 3). 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), cyberbullying (from peers) (National Campaign, 2008; Patchin and Hinduja, 2010) and sexual harassment (Mitchell et al., 2012). The fact that some 'sexting' images fall foul of laws on pornography (Arcabascio, 2010; Sacco et al., 2010; Wolak and Finkelhor, 2011) has amplified public anxieties over the

sexualisation of childhood and girlhood in particular. One unfortunate consequence has been interventions into 'sexting' by law enforcement agencies that often trample on the subtle negotiation of rights, pleasures and pressures of adolescent sexual exploration within a technologically mediated and often ambiguous peer context (Salter et al., 2013).

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). The media has tended to dramatise 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). Analysis of international e-safety, anti-sexting campaigns (a form of public sexting pedagogy) illustrates that these resources tend to work in concert with news media forms, producing particular gendered 'sexting subjects' where girls are positioned as lacking vigilance in their uses of social media (Karaian, 2012; Salter et al., 2013). For example, the widely used UK based short film *Exposed*³ tells a story about a girl putting herself at risk by sending explicit photos to her boyfriend; 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 inherent responsibility for sexting gone wrong therefore lies with the body in the image rather than, for instance, the agents of distribution (Hasinoff, 2013). This results in a form of victim-blaming 'similar to the ways women have been held responsible for protecting themselves from sexual assault' (Salter et al., 2013: 312). These campaigns therefore re-draw strict moral boundaries around girls' (but not typically boys') 'age-appropriate' sexual expression (Renold and Ringrose, 2011: 390) through efforts to prevent sexting practices.

Discourses of 'sexting' risk thus reproduce moral norms (Salter et al., 2013) 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 trends explored in this special issue of the construction of 'young girls' as the main victims of 'sexualisation' and its assumed social harms. The discourse that self-sexualising through sexting images puts girls at moral risk of exploitation works through age-old 'sexual double standards' that: position girls' sexuality as something innocent, pure and at risk of contamination through active desire (Griffin, 1985; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Tolman, 2012; Egan, 2013); and situate girls as morally responsible for protecting the virginal body from hard-wired aggressive male sexuality (Holland et al., 1998).

In this article, we seek to intervene into these complex debates on gender, age and 'sexting' images, drawing upon the perspectives and voices of young people who participated in a UK, London based qualitative research project. We develop a feminist lens to critically analyse how young people interpret and negotiate gendered discourses about sexuality and morality through their discussion of their uses

of mobile digital technology to describe, display and distribute images of their own and others' bodies.

A qualitative approach to researching teens' digital sexual communication

The majority of the empirical research on youth sexting has been quantitative, measuring its prevalence and demographic characteristics (Livingstone and Görzig, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2012). Surveys have found highly variable rates of sexting, depending on what is being measured (Lounsbury et al., 2011), with USA, UK and EU research suggesting that typically around 15 per cent of teenagers report sending or receiving sexual messages while only some 3 per cent report creating or sending 'nude' images (Lenhart, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2011). Although some qualitative research on sexting is now emerging, far less is known about the contexts and experiences of how *everyday* sexual communication among young people is mediated by mobile technology (Davidson et al., 2011) and how it may be changing teens' sexual cultures (Albury and Crawford, 2013).

Our research was conducted in two multicultural state schools in London during 2011. Having negotiated access to the school, and gained research ethics approval, the (female) interviewers⁴ worked with children aged twelve to thirteen (UK Year Eight) and fourteen to fifteen (UK Year Ten), inviting them to reflect on both present and earlier experiences since the start of their secondary education (which in the UK begins around eleven years old).⁵ Our multi-method design integrated focus groups and follow-up individual interviews with thirty-five young people, together with an analysis of their online posts on Facebook and Blackberry.⁶ Our aim was to build up contextual knowledge and rapport through the range of methods employed, to gain insights into a diverse range of experiences and practices, including: posting body photos on Facebook and Blackberry; broadcasting sexually explicit pins through Blackberry; producing, asking for and being asked for photos of nude or nearly nude body parts and also collecting images. Specifically, we followed McClelland and Fine's (2008) 'intensity 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 and Facebook posts, including 'flirting' and their images. Our starting point was young people are sexual beings with rights to communicate in privacy so as to explore their sexuality, intimacy and relationships. 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.

Theorising gendered value and sexual morality in teens' image exchange

The phenomenon called 'sexting' depends not only on cultural practices but also on technological affordances. Mobile smart phone technology like Blackberry Messenger and social networking sites like Facebook enable and *mediate* the construction of a textual and visual cyber-subjectivity through which young people become embedded in a digitally 'networked public' (boyd, 2008).⁷ Researchers exploring gender dynamics on social networking sites argue the very architecture (Papacharissi, 2009) of digital profiles enables visual, bodily 'objectification' and intensified forms of rating and comparison of both women's and men's bodies (Manago et al., 2008; Siibak, 2010; Dobson, 2011; Ringrose, 2011; García Gómez, 2013). Facebook's genesis as 'Facemash' shows the gendered biases in how a commercialised digital culture based on visual images can promote hierarchical comparison, ranking, competition and stereotyping of female faces/bodies, in particular. But how do these gendered visual hierarchies via processes of technological mediation become normalised and work in practice?

To theorise this visual comparison and hierarchy, we draw upon Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood's work on moral visual representation and their theories of how powerful affects and emotion circulate in the viewing of Reality TV (Skeggs and Wood, 2012). They explore how moral value is materialised through practices of looking, judging and evaluating the worth of subjects through various codes, which are classed, raced and gendered. For instance, in her earlier work Skeggs (2004: 169) has explored how 'low-class' morality is coded on girls and women's bodies through practices of revealing too much of the wrong type of cleavage, marking out the bodies in question as both tasteless and sexually shameless. We use these ideas to think about how digital networks are places where images are produced, looked upon, judged and evaluated in a range of gender and age specific ways (Ringrose and Coleman, 2013).

Skeggs also argues that visual representations are judged 'according to the symbolic values generated by [exchange] processes' (2005: 965). So it is in the process of exchange that value is generated. We want to explore these ideas through our data, which illustrates young people's actual discussions about how they negotiate image exchange in the peer network. We use Skeggs' feminist analysis of exchange and use-value in local contexts to think about how 'sexting' images attained value, through analysis of how young people talk about text and imagery on Blackberry Messenger and Facebook. We ask: Why are particular images valuable? Who can they generate value for? Who can they devalue? And, how does this involve ideas about gender and sexual morality?

Smart phone BBM pin broadcasts and mediated bodies: Describing girls' body parts

The most popular smart phone social networking platform used by our participants was Blackberry Messenger (widely called 'BBM' by teenagers). On

BBM, contacts are added by circulating a pin number together with a description to the user's friend network asking them to add the contact, 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 a central way in which pin broadcasts can encode sexual and gendered discourses, as discussed by this Year Eight 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...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 ...
 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 excerpt 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, forty boys 'added her'. 'Tits and bum' are the prime bodily properties or codes of attractiveness which signal value, and these operate in racialised and classed ways. Four of the five girls in this focus group were Black, and it was clear that a nice 'back' and light skin tone are critical in determining attractiveness, although the comment that 'lighties are out of fashion' suggests a moment of resistance, to white normative codes of beauty (Weekes, 1997). 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 Eight).

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. Cherelle (thirteen) said several boys asked for 'a picture of your tits'. These types of requests were discussed at length by Jodie (thirteen):

Jodie: 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... 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'.

Jodie describes being asked for photos by new contacts as part of the ritual of BBM communication, discussing how she has come up with a ruse to avoid sending the photo. She recounted another similar scenario on BBM moments later, this time she discusses coming up with a financial impediment to avoid sending an image:

Jodie: 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' 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'.

These exchanges are recounted with a great deal of pleasure as Jodie recalls her body 'shape' is described in ideal terms as 'mad buff', 'boom' and 'cute'. It appears to be a major compliment to be asked for photos, but girls must also become proficient in negotiating requests. As Jodie explained, whether she did or did not 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. In this instance, Jodie would lie outside the 15 percent of young people shown by surveys actively to engage in

'sexting', though she is certainly negotiating digitally mediated image exchange practices.⁸

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) by the affordances of digital technology. This new norm is the regularisation of requests for images, of breasts, for instance, outside an intimate dating relationship, though not necessarily as a prelude to sex (Lenhart, 2009). These are new norms of digital flirtation, which may or may not be coercive (Albury and Crawford, 2013). For some of our participants, it could be taken as a measure of attractiveness to be asked for a 'special photo', although some girls in Year Ten suggested they were beyond this pressure from boys. In this heterosexual⁹ flirting dynamic there is also a 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 (Holland et al., 1998), the social implications are now complicated in ways that require further analysis 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 digital image exchange

In both research schools, 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 tagging, sending and showing pictures of girls' bodies, particularly their breasts. Pictures, 'screen munches'¹⁰ and posts could all be used as 'proof' of boys' ability to chat to girls and negotiate access to seeing their bodies. Tarek (fifteen) explains:

- I: So... what kind of stuff do you chat about [on BBM]?
- 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. But it wasn't a raw one, it was one with... just the top on.
- 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 a 'raw' 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 (fifteen) 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 thirty 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 of images as *proof* 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. Recalling Skeggs' (2004) analysis of value we see how this image garners worth for the teen boy in a heterosexualised, affective economy of flirting: when an image can be exchanged or looked upon by others it proves that a boy is himself both desired and is desirous.

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

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

Crucially there is a code of ethics being discussed here where revealing the identity of the image is viewed as problematic (see also Albury and Crawford, 2013) although showing the image with the identity concealed is positioned as normative. 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 has been sent, although this possibility is potentially open to him, as explored next.

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

The affective dynamic being discussed is where images of girls' bodies become an acquisition, and where 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 an image passes out of her hands it is understood as a commodity as seen with Kaja and Kamal, which the boy can abuse or not, in ways similar to ideas about sexual reputation (Valenti, 2009). Moreover, many boys and girls across both age groups read the production of images of girls' bodies through hierarchical codes of gendered morality. These girls in a Year Ten 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... We respect ourselves... 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 Ten, explains:

Kylie: 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 Eight, she looks about eighteen, 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... 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 value around looking and desiring in the school culture. Her account of Demi includes signifiers or codes of high sexual value and attractiveness (‘belly hanging out’, piercings, ‘spray tan’, ‘really revealing’ clothes). These are also highly classed, linked to ‘trashy’ femininity discussed by Skeggs (2004) which Kylie implies saying Demi ‘don’t really care what she looks like’. 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; although Demi’s brother seems to attack the boy who keeps such photos, Kylie still attributes moral responsibility primarily to Demi for sending a picture.

Other Year Ten 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. If you are going to have sex with your boyfriend you don’t pictures of it or videos of it...
- Irina: ... 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 captured in ‘sexual’ 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 being caught in a morally suspect image.

The sexual double standard also means that, despite asking for images, many boys also categorised girls who send photos as ‘sket’ or ‘slag’, as illustrated by Year Ten 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 . . . what you are capable of doing, making a girl take a picture of her breasts and give it to you and stuff.
 I: So is that like always what people do?
 Danvir: Not always but sometimes they cut off, don’t take a picture of their face because some people show it around.

As before, boys get ‘rated’ and ‘respect’ for asking for an image and girls get called ‘skets’ although the faces of bodies are also sometimes cut off or ‘greyed out’ by girls. In another example Kaja (Year Ten) talked about being tagged in a Facebook image of a girl’s cleavage with his name written on it:

- Kaja: Some girl, she is like eighteen or nineteen 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.

In this example, the girl tags herself in several images where she has written Kaja’s name across her own cleavage, illustrating a consensual form of image exchange on Facebook. What is interesting, however, is that Kaja says he does not know the girl who did this. She is one of the ‘randoms’ discussed above, she ‘lives far’ and she has ‘no shame’ (a moral marker of abjection, that her sexual expression is shameful) 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 another older girl who sent him a picture with ‘have sex with me’ and another boy’s name with an arrow written down her body:

- Kaja: 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 as we have discussed such sexual double standards are hardly new, the technology provides new ways for value to circulate through images, and for value to become 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 would not 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 implications of a 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 (Ibid). Thus while boys' image collections of girls' bodies can garner them variable value and ratings, girls who send images are at risk of moral sanctioning and 'slut-shaming' (Albury and Crawford, 2012). This relates to the existing peer structure and hierarchy and positions of popularity and being 'known' (Ringrose, 2013). However, whether the identity was known as with Demi or unknown as with the 'random' girl who tags Kaja, each is marked out as shameful and morally suspect.

Linking up: The entanglement of online–offline

In addition to negotiations over image exchange, images can gain a further use-value for boys when they imply 'linking' (meeting a contact) in the offline world:

- I: 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.

Photographic evidence of sexual promises or 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 Eight 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 possible fall-out for girls of this sort of photo being distributed was the focus of considerable debate:

- 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 here is complex: the Year Eight girls seemed outraged that girls could be 'labelled' in this way, but they also suggest that the girl implicated herself by getting upset. The importance of girls' being strong in the face of threats and requests was evident across our data, but as before there was a repeated projection that some girls were simply 'stupid'. This was also apparent in girls' discussions of 'linking' up with a little known or unknown new contact through social networks like BBM. The girls were very aware of discourses of 'stranger danger' (Guo, 2008), and suggested in one focus group that other 'stupid' girls might meet up with guys but they wouldn't. As Cherelle (thirteen) later explained in an individual interview, she was not like some girls who would go to a guy's house and 'beat' (have sex). However, the actual discussion of managing particular requests was more complex than this as Cherelle describes having to delete a 'nasty' contact:

- Cherelle: A boy, he said 'Oh you're peng' – 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.
- 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.

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. With BBM requests to 'suck on it' and for 'blows' and 'beats' happening regularly from contacts, she was adamant it was 'not a joke'. In such scenarios, the online and offline spheres become difficult to separate. However, working out when and how digital practices become coercive is critical (Hasinoff, 2013), given 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 in discourses and practices of teen 'sexting'

Whilst we were presenting a version of this article in the USA, a member of the audience seemed horrified by our data, *particularly* the perceived 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 even sexual violence, in which girls are called upon to perform particular sexual scripts and display images of their body parts, 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).

In this article, we have sought to trouble simplistic, sensationalist, shock discourses of age-inappropriate sexting risks for teen-aged girls. Our findings suggest that what is *most* problematic for young people are the pernicious and persistent discourses of gender inequity and sexual double standards around teen girls' and also adult women's sexuality and bodies (Tolman, 2012). Our feminist analysis of value and morality enabled us to illustrate how teen sexting images gain currency as part of a heterosexualised visual economy in peer networks in gender differentiated ways. Akin to adult 'postfeminist' media cultures, for teen girls, being asked for an image of one's body carries value, even constitutes a new norm of feminine desirability within today's digital teen peer networks. For boys, acquiring images can work as proof of their desirability and access to girls' bodies, constituting new norms masculine performance. Images of girls' bodies were found to have considerable exchange value for boys, contributing to their popularity or 'ratings' because they could be collected and shown to other boys, although we described how bodies held differential value and were marked through racial and classed codes. However, consonant with familiar sexual double standards, both boys and girls described girls who sent images as 'skets' who lacked self-respect. Thus images of girls' bodies can be used to devalue and shame girls in the teen peer network, and girls are also subject to age-related panics over such images from adults.

Consequently, we conclude by pointing to the urgent need to continue to address the gender (in)equity issues highlighted by discourses and practices of teen sexting. The point is not to keep telling girls and boys to stop taking images of girls' bodies, the dominant 'age-appropriate' sexual behavior message in news media and e-safety campaigns discussed at the beginning of this article. Rather we have to understand the underlying gendered discourses and power that enable a context where girls' mediated body parts (e.g. images of breasts) are highly valued as commodities, where it is possible for such images to be traded like currency, which then constructs a situation where girls stand to 'lose' something (namely their sexual reputation)

when images are shared, in ways similar to debates on female virginity (Valenti, 2009). In this spirit, and as the starting point for ways forward in our thinking, we would like to close with a critical, utopic feminist question that begins to open up rather than close down questions about girls' desires; and which seeks to disrupt the taken-for-granted sexual, 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 teen girls could unproblematically take, post or send an image of their breasts to whomever they wished?

Notes

1. See Egan (this issue) for an interesting discussion of the projective pitfalls of the post-feminist lens which pits sexual objectification against sexual liberation without considering the complex intertwining of these poles.
2. 'Sexting: A New Teen Cyber-bullying "Epidemic"', *The Telegraph*, 12 April 2012. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/9199126/Sexting-a-new-teen-cyber-bullying-epidemic.html>
3. *Exposed* was produced by the UK's Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ovR3FF_6us (last accessed 28 December 2012).
4. The two interviewers are both referred to as 'I' in the data excerpts throughout the article.
5. The majority of sexting research, including qualitative work, is also with older teens (Albury and Crawford, 2013), making our research with the younger age group of twelve to fifteen year olds a significant contribution to the international research literature.
6. Our methodology involved group interviews, then twenty-two follow-up individual interviews, as well as 'friending' participants through a research Facebook account and mapping Facebook posts for three months (for further details of the methodology, including school staff interviews, please see Ringrose et al., 2012).
7. While Facebook research is now widespread, this article also illustrates 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 regulate what is posted upon it).
8. Many of the girls had inventive responses to requests for images of their bodies; for further analysis, please see Ringrose et al. (2012) and Ringrose and Coleman (2013).
9. For a discussion of how homophobic attacks like 'you're gay' entered into the discussion if boys, in particular, challenged the 'sexism' of image exchange, please see Ringrose et al. (2012).
10. Screen Munch is a Blackberry application that according to its website allows you to 'capture munch your Blackberry screen and keep it forever', much like the 'print screen' function on Windows (<http://www.screenmuncher.com/>)

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