‘They’re you know, their audience’: How women are (ab)used to cement the heterosexual bonds between men

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Abstract
This paper explores how young people (aged 18–24 years) in Ireland attribute young men’s sexual harassment and violence against women both to the situational demands of what we call ‘heteromasculine homosociality’ and young men’s negotiation of role taking with women. Interpreting young people’s explanations for sexual violence, the paper argues that through different forms of sexual harassment and violence, women are (ab)used to cement the heterosexual bonds between men. The argument is explored by drawing on young people’s explanations of three forms of sexual harassment and violence: verbal violence, unwanted sexual touching and assault and image-based sexual abuse. The data comes from 28 interviews with young people as part of a European-funded research study that aims to explore both the discourses that young people use in their understandings of gender and violence against women and how young men may be supported in combatting violence against women. Among other implications, we suggest that as well as deconstructing attitudes towards women, prevention work and interventions with men must also focus on men’s beliefs about the normative basis for masculine status and belonging between men.

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Introduction
In Ireland, the problem of men’s sexual harassment and violence against adolescent and young adult women has been highlighted by prevalence surveys (Burke et al., 2020; Union of Students in Ireland, 2013). For example, the recent Sexual Experiences Survey (Burke et al., 2020) of 6026 students from 14 higher educational institutions (HEIs) across the state found that 52% of women reported at least one experience of unwanted sexual touching, completed or attempted penetration since beginning third level.

‘Flashpoint’ controversies (Ging et al., 2019) have also highlighted the attitudes and beliefs that provide the supportive context for sexual violence in Ireland. In November 2018, the trial of a man who was acquitted of rape of a 17-year-old woman ignited controversy due to the defendant’s barrister asking the jury to consider how the assault might have been linked to ‘the way she was dressed’ (Heylin, 2018: online). The assumption embedded in the question that the woman was ‘asking for it’ (Weiss, 2009) is an all-too-common rape myth that suggests that women are to blame for igniting men’s supposedly uncontrollable sexual urges (Hyde et al., 2008; Richardson, 2010; Weiss, 2009).

Indeed, victim-blaming discourses also implicitly imply how motivations for sexual violence are constructed.

In Ireland, we know little about how young people actually explain men’s sexual harassment and violence against women. Interestingly, one comment made by a participant in the Sexual Experiences Survey (Burke et al., 2020: 41) linked men’s sexual violence against women to socially constructed expectations around what Connell (2005: 70) refers to as ‘normative’ masculinity or notions of what ‘men ought to be’:

I think a big reason that I never hear being mentioned is the pressure on young men to be seen pulling women on nights out and to constantly have girlfriends.

This explanation invokes three themes to explain sexual harassment and violence against women: the ‘what’ (i.e. what men attempt to do) of conveying heterosexual desire (‘constantly have a girlfriend’); the ‘how’ or means of doing so (‘pulling women’); and the ‘why’, namely ‘pressure on young men’ or in other words, men’s aim to secure other men’s approval. This is a social explanation that contrasts with more essentialist ‘ideologies about male sexuality’ (Weiss, 2009: 812) that explain men’s sexual violence on supposedly uncontrollable biological urges.

In this paper, we draw on data that similarly challenges essentialist explanations for men’s sexual harassment and violence. The data comes from 28 in-depth interviews with young people (aged 18–24 years) in Ireland conducted as part of the PositivMasc research study. PositivMasc is a European, multi-country research project, funded by GENDER-NET Plus that aims to explore the discourses that young people in Ireland, Israel, Spain and Sweden use in their understandings of gender and violence against
women. A key aim of the project is to explore how young men may be supported in combating violence against women. Fusing the concepts of homosociality (Flood, 2008) and compulsory heterosexuality (Richardson, 2010), we use the concept of ‘heteromasculine homosociality’ as a heuristic to highlight how young people attribute men’s sexual harassment and violence against women both to young men’s desire to secure heterosexual bonds between men, and to men’s (non) negotiation of role taking with women. Among other implications, we suggest that as well as deconstructing attitudes towards women, prevention work and interventions with men – whether through formal and informal curricula (Hickey and Fitzclare, 2000), specific sexual violence prevention programmes (Carline et al., 2018) or bystander intervention programmes (Kaya et al., 2020) must also focus on men’s beliefs about the normative basis for masculine status and belonging between men.

‘Lad culture’ and sexual violence amongst young adults in Ireland

As in the UK context (Nichols, 2018), the term ‘laddishness’ and ‘lad culture’ has been invoked to explain young men’s sexual violence against women in Ireland (see, e.g. O’Brien, 2016), but these claims have been predominantly found in media reactions or discussions around flashpoint controversies, thus we know relatively little about how young people in Ireland understand and explain sexual violence against women. Two exceptions, however, are pieces of research conducted by Hyde et al. (2008) and SAFE Ireland (2019).

The ‘lad culture’ concept did not arise in Hyde et al.’s (2008) research on Irish secondary school pupils’ (age 15–19 years) experiences of sexual coercion. Here, young women explained young men’s sexual coercion as being associated with intoxication; they implicitly invoked the ‘male sex drive’ discourse as they implied that young men’s sexual coercion is normal (Hyde et al., 2008). Safe Ireland (2019) conducted mixed methods research on attitudes toward gender equality, gender roles and domestic abuse. In the all-female focus groups conducted as part of the study, young women (aged under 25 years) considered ‘lad culture’ to be an issue for them but felt it is normalised in Irish society, while the young men (aged under 25 years) constructed the behaviour embedded in lad cultures as natural. While there is no agreed definition, ‘lad cultures’ have been characterised by “having a laugh”, alcohol consumption, disruptive behaviours, objectifying women, and an interest in pastimes and subjects constructed as masculine’ (Nichols, 2018: 75). Scholars have expressed concern, however, over how the figure of the ‘lad’ denotes a static and monolithic construction that does not adequately grapple with classed and geographical differences and heterogeneity within different forms of masculinities themselves (Jeffries, 2020; Nichols, 2018; Phipps, 2017).

Given the statistics and flashpoint controversies in relation to sexual harassment and violence that have been identified specifically within HEIs in Ireland, the Irish Minister for Higher Education Simon Harris TD has promised action on the issue
(Burns, 2020). The recently published *Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions* (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) has outlined that HEIs should develop educational workshops relating to bystander intervention skills and sexual consent towards combating sexual harassment and violence. As part of this broader debate, it is important that research be conducted to explore both the formative contexts of attitudes and beliefs that underpin sexual harassment and violence and the dynamics which support and consolidate these beliefs. This paper seeks to make a timely contribution to these debates and initiatives. It explores one key motive cited by young people to explain what the Minister has referred to as an ‘epidemic’ (Burns, 2020) that women are (ab)used to cement the heterosexual bonds between men. In the next section, we outline a conceptual framework to explore what this might mean.

**Theorising masculinity and homosociality**

Essentialist notions of masculinity imply that since ‘what men do’ is supposedly natural, the hierarchical arrangement of gender relations, expressed through men’s sexual harassment and violence against women is unchangeable (Weiss, 2009). Scholars working in the area of critical studies of men and masculinities refute this as an ideological claim (Connell, 2005; Schwalbe, 2014) and instead argue that masculinity is something men ‘do’ to fulfil cultural expectations and privileges that come with establishing oneself as a ‘man’ (Phipps, 2017; Schwalbe, 2014). We understand masculinities as fluid, contextually dependent and geographically specific (Connell, 2005). Recent Irish research on White heterosexual men in Ireland shows that masculinity for men can be a fluid construct that changes through the life course (Darcy, 2019).

While individual men may impute masculinity to themselves based on self-assessing and validating their performances (Schwalbe, 2014) and gain personal sense of esteem for doing so, this is not a dynamic that can be consistently sustained (Goffman, 1967; Schwalbe, 2014). Rather, masculinity must be validated and approved by an external audience (Schwalbe, 2014), mainly other men. Masculinity has thus been described as a homosocial enactment (Flood, 2008; Kimmel, 2005). Homosociality refers to ‘the non-sexual attractions held by men (or women) for members of their own sex’ (Bird, 1996: 121). In conceptualising masculinity as a homosocial enactment, we recognise Goddard’s (2000) important point that men’s identities are not monolithically determined by other men, but also of men’s perceptions of what women too, think and expect of them. In our view, however, a key utility of the concept is that it emphasises how men may privilege other men’s judgements about normative masculinity and the basis for belonging. What construction this normative masculinity takes can vary and may even be non-hierarchical, where homosocial bonding is based on tactility and emotional intimacy (Anderson and McCormack, 2015). In this paper, however, we are referring to the privileging of a specific configuration of perspectives and beliefs about masculinity called the ‘masculinist self’ (Schwalbe, 1992), of which a primary characteristic is that men’s capacity or willingness to role take with women is diminished or absent: ‘Role taking here is “perspective taking”, that is trying to imagine what another is thinking and
feeling’ (Schwalbe, 1992: 29, sic) and consists of three types: projective role taking involves putting oneself in another’s place; inferential role taking involves inferring another’s thoughts and feelings on the basis of taking note of ‘outward signs of the other’s inner state’ (Schwalbe, 1992: 36), while receptive role taking involves feeling with the other and ‘requires a willingness to let the other affect us emotionally’ (Schwalbe, 1992: 37). Adherence to the masculinist self is synthesised by group dynamics and thus, within social situations, some young men in homosocial groups take on the perspectives, viewpoints and judgements of ‘masculinist generalized others’ and do not ‘consider prospective acts from any perspective that does not make male experience paramount’ (Schwalbe, 1992: 43).

The point is that the ordering of men’s homosocial relations has been linked to sexual violence against women. Specifically, women have been used as ‘a kind of currency that men use to improve their ranking on a masculine social scale’ (Kimmel, 2005: 33), mainly, to prove a key ‘marker of manhood’ (Kimmel, 2005): heterosexuality. Men’s masculine status and homosocial bonding can be based on attributes other than heterosexuality alone (Anderson and McCormack, 2015; Flood, 2008), but given the strong link between the latter as a key component of the former within both the broader literature (Hyde et al., 2008; Richardson, 2010) and the data in this paper, we use the term ‘heteromasculine homosociality’ as a heuristic to emphasise the centrality of both to interpret some young people’s explanations of men’s sexual violence towards women.

The emotional rewards of heteromasculine homosociality are key in understanding the power of this group-based dynamic. What makes masculinity itself compelling is the link between ‘external coercion and internal compulsion’: namely, as a social practice, masculinity fulfils ‘needs for esteem, efficacy… love, inclusion, acceptance, and material support’ (Schwalbe, 1992: 32). Indeed, researchers have theorised heterosexuality as compelling for young men (Richardson, 2010: 740), not in the sense that they are ‘subject to powerful sexual urges fuelled by “raging hormones” that they find difficult to control’, but that they are subject to social expectations, to an extent that Hyde et al. (2008) have called this a form of social coercion. Lacking perceived heterosexuality can result in both self-shame and shaming from peers (Hyde et al., 2008; Richardson, 2010). In other words, heterosexuality is a collective achievement, acting as ‘a “social glue”, central to male homosociality and approval, and as means of “doing masculinity”’ (Richardson, 2010: 745).

In some men’s homosocial relations, heterosexuality constitutes a key pillar through which men express sameness with each other as a basis for bonding. Women, however, are problematically used as instruments through which this bond is maintained. As Flood (2008: 350) puts it, ‘Male bonding feeds sexual violence against women and sexual violence against women feeds male bonding’. Men may engage in sexually objectifying talk, or what Curry (1991: 128) calls, ‘women-as-object stories’, where women are referred to in terms of objects of sexual conquests and othered as ‘them’ within competitively braggadocious storytelling (Bird, 1996; Curry, 1991; Flood, 2008; Grazian, 2007). As scholars note, however, such stories are less about sexual desire and the ‘truth’ of them, than functioning as heterosexual signifiers (Curry, 1991; Sweeney, 2014). In this paper, these themes are similarly invoked by young people, but with the
addition of an explanation that focuses on men’s negotiation of role taking with women as a further moderating factor in perpetration of sexual harassment and violence.

In using the heuristic heteromasculine homosociality, we recognise that masculinities are not simply (re)made by men alone (Goddard, 2000). As Phipps (2017: 825) argues in relation to ‘laddish masculinities’, there is a need to explore how these forms intersect with other forms ‘such as those articulated by men of colour, gay men, trans men, non-binary and women’. Beyond the ways in which masculinities are made by those who do not identify as themselves as ‘men’, we also recognise that masculinities are (re)made and intertwined with broader structures and ‘contemporary cultural, political and social formations’ (Phipps, 2017: 818). What we are doing in this paper is interpreting young people’s own’s explanations, ones which are rooted in their perceptions of the most salient factors which constitute the socio-negative behaviours they discuss. The concepts of homosociality and the masculinist self are useful for interpreting the data here, but we must acknowledge that there is heterogeneity and plurality within different forms of masculinity (Phipps, 2017) and as we argue later, research with men who engage in these behaviours themselves are crucial for deconstructing the monolithic understandings of men and masculinities that can creep into debates about young men’s sexual harassment and violence (Jeffries, 2020; Nichols, 2018; Phipps, 2017). Following an outline of the methodology, we proceed to explore how young people attribute different forms of sexual violence against women to both the situational demands of heteromasculine homosociality and men’s role taking with women both within and beyond the situations themselves.

Methodology

The data upon which this paper is based is from 28 semi-structured interviews (12 men and 16 women) with young people (aged 18–24 years) in Ireland. Fifteen interviews were conducted in person and 12 through telephone due to coronavirus disease-2019 restrictions, while another participant emailed her answers to the interview guide due to discomfort around the prospect of being interviewed. Twenty participants self-selected for participation based on a paid advert placed on Facebook. This led to the recruitment of a further five participants via snowballing. One participant self-selected through a youth worker who forwarded the advert to young people who used a youth centre and one self-selected in response to an email advert sent to all students at the University. Another participant was recruited via being a close relation of a member of the research team. The advert specifically named that the study was about ‘violence against women’, thus we acknowledge that those who self-selected may constitute a specific sample for whom the term ‘violence against women’ was familiar and for whom the issues raised in this paper may have been particularly salient.

As well as the issues with self-selection, we also note that this is a small qualitative study that did not seek representativeness on any of the issues raised. Participants were all of Irish nationality. Not all participants completed the demographic questionnaire in full. We did not ask about class, and we note this as a limitation, as scholars have drawn attention to how the concepts of ‘lad culture’ and ‘rape culture’ have been used.
to demonise working-class communities, despite middle-class and elite men engaging in the practices associated with these terms (Phipps, 2017). We also note that the 19 participants were currently enrolled in or had completed third level education. Seven participants were currently enrolled in or had completed the Irish leaving certificate and two participants were Irish Naval cadets. Participants included those who were living in urban, suburban and rural locations and were either unemployed, part-time or full-time employed at the time of interview. Twenty-six of the interviews were conducted by the first author, a man. It is possible some participants, particularly young women, might have held back on their feelings about men as perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence, perceiving the naming of men to be a threat to his identity. Given the vocal frustration they shared in regard to these behaviours, however, we feel this was not a significant issue.

Ethical approval was granted by University College Cork’ Social Research Ethics Committee and all names are pseudonyms. The interview guide contained questions about contemporary expectations of gender in Ireland as well as questions designed to elicit their views, attitudes and responses to violence against women. Vignettes depicting hypothetical scenarios of different forms of violence against women were also used to explore how young people respond to and explain violence against women.

Interviews lasted an average of 50 min to 1 h and 20 min. The data was transcribed and subject to open coding (Saldaña, 2016), which culminated into general themes. One theme derived related to how young people explained different forms of sexual harassment and violence against women. The focus of this paper is on a common sub-theme that arose in their narratives – heteromasculine homosociality. Two of the vignettes were particularly pertinent to this theme. What we refer to as the ‘assault’ vignette depicted a scenario where a young woman was grabbed by her buttocks at a party without her consent, while the ‘image’ vignette was based on an ex-boyfriend posting naked photos of his ex-girlfriend online or what is commonly (and problematically) known as ‘revenge pornography’ (McGlynn et al., 2017).

Findings

Verbal violence and objectification

Verbal harassment, objectification and violence were identified by participants not as the simple practice of individual men enacting individually held problematic attitudes and hostile beliefs about women, but a collectively based practice among men. Recounting incidents of verbal abuse enacted by men against women, some young people highlighted harassment that was of the sexually objectifying form, using a discourse that involved ‘treating women like a piece of meat and like one saying something, the other could outdo the other one and all chiming in about this one girl’s appearance’ (Laura). As Laura also noted, this talk can also encompass ‘boys talking to each other about oh, I did this, I did that’, or as Liam put it, ‘boasting about sexual exploits’. As these quotes suggest, status within male peer groups can be built upon heterosexuality, marked by
claims about multiple sexual conquests and experiences of different forms of sexual activity (Grazian, 2007; Sweeney, 2014).

While the current debate in Ireland about ‘lad culture’ generally refers to the age group of the participants in this study (18–24 years), Phillip’s recalling of his experiences in teenage discos around age 13 highlights how such verbal boasting and objectification begins at a much earlier age (Robinson, 2005):

Interviewer: And is there an expectation on, let’s say, boys of that age to sort of initiate the kissing or-
Phillip: Oh, a hundred percent… they’d always ask you after the night like how many have you shifted (kissed)? Like they’d actually have kind of almost competition to see like who can do the best and stuff… For guys it’s much more about the quantity… The girls want to get with the guy they like, but the guys just want to get with as many as they can.

This excerpt is revealing of some of the stakes and microdynamics at play in hetero-masculine homosociality. First, this talk produces hierarchical demarcations between men and women where masculinity is about both ‘success’ with women (Curry, 1991) and dominance over them (Wight, 1994), implying that sexual activity is ‘not a joint activity but something males do to females’ where ‘women are passive’ and ‘acted on’ (Wight, 1994: 722). It exemplifies Kimmel’s (2005: 33) point that women may be talked about as ‘a kind of currency’ to build heterosexual status, as in this case, status is accrued by claims to have had kissed multiple women. Second, embedded in this talk is a hierarchical demarcation among young men, as in-group status is organised and dependent on the number of women young men claim to kiss. Concerned about their own standing amongst peers, women are rendered as ‘pawns in a competitive game that is played by and for males’ (Flood, 2008: 346) where they are constituted as an instrumental means of heterosexual signification.

Ultimately, objectification diminishes empathy for women (Curry, 1991; Grazian, 2007; Schwalbe, 1992) as it prevents the very ‘receptive role taking’ (Schwalbe, 1992: 46) that would otherwise compel men to respond to women ‘as persons whose subjectivity must be fathomed and who must be negotiated with as equals’. While this extract is not about verbal objectification that is directed towards any particular woman, it is problematic insofar as such talk provides and contributes to the formative context for more embodied and direct forms of harassing behaviour against women. As per the expectations of ‘morning after’ stories of heterosexual conquests among undergraduate men (Boswell and Spade, 1996), Phillip suggests that young men of early secondary school age may both expect to be asked and are expected to ask their peers about heterosexual encounters after discos (Sweeney, 2014). As we will see in the next section, Phillip points out that young men must have a positive answer, namely, one that is greater than zero. While young men can ‘boast’ and lie about sexual experiences, O’Neill (2014) highlights research that shows how some young men may actually engage in sexually harassing and intrusive practices to precisely provide them with a story to later recount to peers both as
evidence of their heterosexuality and as a means for homosocial bonding. In other words, this talk can simultaneously be based on and be supportive of harassment and assault of actual women.

Of course, verbal violence and objectification can also be directed at women as Sorcha highlights:

I’ve noticed that some men can be quick to call a woman a slut or a bitch if they do something they don’t like. An example is when I was leaving a bar one night with a friend and a group of guys walked by. One of them attempted to drunkenly flirt with me and I shot him down while walking away. His friends had laughed at him and he then called me a ‘ginger bitch’ and continued to shout more insults. I feel like it made him feel ‘cooler’ in front of his friends after he had been rejected. Instances like that are common especially if a woman turns a man down, ‘slut’ can be frequently used.

Here, the man in question was perceived to have failed at heterosexual ‘success’ (Grazian, 2007). While it is very possible that he would have deployed these hostile insults even without the audience of male peers, the presence of peers no doubt inflated what was really at stake here: his heteromasculine standing amongst the group. As a result, he resorted to insults to recuperate masculine status since she not only disrupted the chance for heterosexual ‘success’, but did so in a way that inverted the usual dynamic of such interactions where men enact the dominant role.

Typified by the popular catchphrase ‘boys will be boys’, verbal forms of harassment, objectification and violence are commonly read as the outcome of some biological impulses that supposedly reside in men, yet young men can and do recognise that such behaviour may be derived from social constructions of masculinity (Robinson, 2005). Cormac for example raised the issue of ‘wolf-whistling’ and recounted an incident of him driving while his friend reached over to beep the horn to harass a group of women who were walking by the car outside:

Cormac: And there was a couple of girls across the road and sure, he jumped across… So he was kind of beeping the horn at them… And he shouted out the window. And I was just like, ‘Oh, my God! They’re going to think this is me now’… I always kind of just go ‘why, like? Why are you at that, like?’… I’d be like ‘if you like her, just go and say hello…’

Interviewer: And what’s the reaction then when you say, ‘Oh, why are you doing that?’

Cormac: Oh, they’d kind of go ‘Oh, she’ll be alright.’ And I’d just be like, ‘Okay.’ I don’t like it, basically… They’re expecting me to start going, ‘Oh, yeah, you’re class.’ You know, ‘yeah, you’re brilliant or whatever.’ [our emphasis]

Cormac first constructs the motives of his friend as being based on the actual sexual desire that is problematically enacted. His suggestion of an alternative way of expressing
desire (‘just go say hello’), however, neglects how actual desire is not always the purpose of such harassment (Quinn, 2002). Indeed, his narrative later shifts as he recognises that in these situations, women are constituted as objects ‘onto which men’s homosocial sexuality is projected’ (Quinn, 2002: 395).

Cormac’s questioning of his friend’s behaviour and his awareness of the homosocially derived basis of such behaviour points to an awareness of the role young men can play in combatting these behaviours. Unfortunately, there are some barriers to intervening. As Robinson (2005: 27; also Sweeney, 2014) argues, such behaviour may be something men feel they ‘have to do’ to avoid the ‘very real’ consequences of not consistently proving masculinity in front of peers; although ‘you can see the uncomfortable’ (Aine, sic) on group members’ faces, informal rules around ‘codes of mateship’ (Flood, 2008) prohibit objection to these group dynamics:

The biggest thing I see in lad culture, is there is a real sense of following whatever’s going on… like a sense of kind of like, you know, you don’t talk out against the lads… I do feel chatting to lads there’s more of a discomfort if you’re not following with things and that you certainly don’t get a sense of going against it. (Carrie)

Reflecting on having witnessed such collective performances in secondary school, Liam offered an insightful narrative about how sexual boasting is based on norms of gendered expectations which are reinforced and validated through male peer groups. For him, this boasting is to ‘prove bravado’. In describing experiences in secondary school, for example, he states how:

you’d just hear boasting and you’d even-you would question the credibility of it a lot of the time… a lot of lads kind of like feel like that have to subscribe to say things or like talk about women or talk about… girls in a certain way even though they don’t believe it themselves… like if they were on their own and it wasn’t kind of after a match of if they were on their own with a girl, no way would they ever… they genuinely don’t believe it, but they, for that kind of-the social part and to keep their face and save face they’ve got to say it there. Or go along with it. And it’s just because to not do it would be-would hurt their, you know, their standing in that group.

Liam invokes the classic theme of ‘face’ that is implied within the data throughout this paper. ‘Face’, as Goffman (1967: 10) puts it, is not something that the individual possesses but must always be proved: ‘… it is only on loan to him [sic] from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it’. In homosocially based sexual objectification and violence, it is young men’s male peer groups, who constitute the ‘generalised others’ (Schwalbe, 1992) that judge appropriate action for gendered identities. It is not simply that failing to perform masculinity ‘successfully’ in the middle of a performance (such as the case of the man in Sorcha’s narrative) gets met with peer disapproval and sanction (Sweeney, 2014), but also in not performing or engaging in objectifying and derogatory talk about women (Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008). As Bird (1996: 130) found, there can be unease evident in men’s account of homosocial behaviours as
they can report pressures to ‘follow the lead’ of the group. Liam’s narrative best encapsulates these dynamics and highlights how sexual objectification and boasting is not solely the outcome of individual men enacting practices that are based simply on hostile beliefs about women. Rather, they are mechanisms by which group membership is cemented and maintained, based on certain beliefs not merely about women, but about men and masculinity.

**Unwanted sexual touching and assault**

Given our use of the party assault vignette, it is understandable why many participants’ narratives revolved around bar and nightclub contexts. These spaces can be seen as constituting ‘markets’ for singles to pursue potential romantic or casual sexual partners (Grazian, 2007). While such intentions can be individual preferences, both the broader literature (Flood, 2008; Grazian, 2007; Vaynman et al., 2020) and the data here suggests that some forms of heterosexual pursuit can also be a homosocial group activity where a romantic bond or sexual activity is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, namely, to reaffirm group bonds and/or to secure heteromasculine validation.

One variation on this theme is about ‘showing off’. As Aoife explained, this behaviour is about ‘one of the lads showing off to another … It’s never a guy who’ll do it on his own, like, he’d talk to you otherwise, you know. It’s this kind of group behaviour’. Based on her experience, she stated that ‘you’d never see it if there are girls in a group, you know. So like it’s obviously known that it’s not tolerated…’ As she described it, these heterosexual performances are performed only in groups composed of other men, because ‘They’re, you know, their audience’. Her suggestion that young men do not engage in these behaviours in front of women who are their friends since they know ‘it’s not tolerated’ by those women is in line with Quinn’s (2002: 399) view that ‘Sexually harassing behaviours are produced from more than a lack of knowledge, simply sexist attitudes, or misplaced desire’. Rather, young men’s privileging of other men’s power in validating masculine status and the basis of belonging means that women’s perspectives are given secondary or no consideration (Robinson, 2005). As a form of peer influence rather than direct pressure (Hyde et al., 2008), what characterises ‘showing off’ is an element of self-initiated heterosexual signification to impress peers. As Michael implies, this ‘showing off’ can be highly instrumental, where women are dehumanised and used as momentary ‘props’ (Schwalbe, 2014) for signifying a masculine self:

This is the pinnacle of masculinity that, oh, God, ‘I’ll have you whenever I want you’, like. Not even sex but like you’d even see it in nightclubs. This absolute curmudgeon of a lad will come up to a girl and insist that they shift (kiss) in a really weird way, and it’s kind of ‘oh, look’. And then he’ll go back to his friends and be like, ‘Oh, look what I just pulled.’

Grazian (2007) argues that as ‘emerging adults’, ‘doing gender’ is particularly important for men of this age group and while heterosexuality may comprise an important signifier of ‘doing’ masculinity in a general sense, this expectation may be inflated to due to expectations around the ‘quintessential’ college experience (Sweeney, 2014). Indeed,
Laura points out that entry into third level education comes with expectations around ‘how many nights a week’ students are supposed to go out and associated ideas around ‘how you’re supposed to act’. When asked if these pressures apply to young men, she invoked compulsory heterosexuality: ‘There is definitely a pressure. If you’re a boy, oh, you should be getting with these girls and like having sex with this many women’. Yet, while Irish surveys (Burke et al., 2020; Union of Students in Ireland, 2013) and media discourses (Burns, 2020) may draw attention to sexual harassment and assault within the context of the Irish HEIs amongst the 18–24 age group, in particular, interviewees’ narratives also highlight that the process of ‘becoming a man’ through heteromasculine homosociality in the ‘emerging adult’ years is simply another step in a socialising process that started long before. Speaking about her experience of being slapped on the buttocks around age 12 or 13 at a teenage disco, Saoirse argued that this behaviour was about ‘looking like a big boy. Like if you’re doing that and your friends are around you, they’ll be like, ha-ha look, he just did that’. Again, responding to the ‘assault’ vignette, Phillip immediately drew upon his experiences of attending discos at age 13. Worryingly, he notes that such behaviour was something that ‘used to happen all the time’ (his emphasis) and is and was ‘part of the outgoing culture’. While the literature on the early adolescent years points to sexual harassment occurring in predominantly verbal forms from around the ages of 12–14 years (e.g. Dalley-Trim, 2007; Robinson, 2005), studies have also found evidence of physical forms of sexual aggression occurring at this age (Tolman et al., 2003).

When participants talk about sexual aggressiveness as an outcome of men’s heteromasculine homosocial performances, what they are effectively saying is that violence against women essentially pays men a ‘psychological wage’ (Schwalbe, 2014) from their peer group, namely, a sense of pride. Yet, echoing Lyman’s (1987) analysis of the role of sexist jokes within men’s homosocial groups, we would argue that given the perceptions of masculine inadequacy that may be provoked by the non-repeating of heterosexual performances, the sexual aggression that some young people describe here seems ‘more like a defense against vulnerability than a positive ideal’ (Lyman, 1987: 150). In other words, such aggression is not simply about gaining masculine esteem, but to ward off threats to a perceived lack of it (Hyde et al., 2008):

Interviewer: And what happens then if a boy or young man would say no, zero is the answer, like in shifting?

Philip: …if you never kissed a girl before, you’re ‘frigid’. So from like the onset it’s something you want to do because you don’t—they literally have an insult to call you for it. So the entire idea is if you’re not in it then you’re immediately lower. So it’s not like you’re not playing, it’s that you’re a bad thing.

Philip’s points parallel Tolman et al.’s (2003) research in the US where boys indicated a pressure to kiss girls to indicate their heterosexuality and avoid teasing from other boys. Discussing teenage discos, Claire argues that heterosexual proof needs to go further than
kissing at discos and in fact can be based on the perceived experience of intercourse: ‘it’s like you have to not be a virgin when you hit third year or else you’re a loser’. That some young men may be constructed as a ‘bad thing’ or a ‘loser’ highlights precisely, Lyman’s (1987: 153) point that male peer groups ‘are shame cultures… because the bond is a group identity that subordinates the individual to the rules, and because social control is imposed through collective judgements…’ In other words, there is inequality among men in such groups where young men’s status can depend on their relations to women’s bodies and subjectivities and this may ultimately contribute to a culture of sexual violence:

It is the point of it’s coaxied by your friends if you do that. I mean, [I’m] not saying if you raped a woman you’re a great guy, but if you get with a girl, they think it’s a great thing, it’s a great advantage. (Saoirse)

This inequality between men can also impact some young men’s disposition to intervene in what they see as problematic situations. Sean, for example, talks about having ‘stopped a fella going at like a woman’ in bars where he worked and argues that willingness to intervene is helped by thinking about how a woman close to him might also feel in these situations. When amongst friends, however, such inclination to intervene is significantly diminished, since the group works as a team to fuel self-confidence of a group member who is engaged in heterosexual pursuit (also Grazian, 2007):

Sean: But let’s say if you were with a bunch of lads, you were with your mates and it was happening. You’d be kind of less inclined because of you can have all them after you, that aspect, you know that way… And your friends are condoning it and then you’re the only one against it. So there’s peer pressure almost

Interviewer: So is it that, if you intervened, would they say something or—

Sean: Yeah, they’d say something about it, especially if you see them all like going along with it or like cheering them on. That kind of thing you know.

Given the shared sense of pride and camaraderie underpinning such behaviour, it is understandable why stopping a group member’s engagement in such heterosexual pursuit can elicit disappointment, annoyance and shaming from the group. As Grazian (2007: 235) explains, in these situations, the group members can internalise another member’s success of heterosexual hooking up as a ‘shared activity’. This is because success is in a large part something that is validated and supported by peers, thus, the group attributes responsibility for success of another member partly to themselves (Grazian, 2007). Intervening cuts off shared group pride and disrupts another member’s opportunity to gain heterosexual and group affirmation.

‘Showing off’ is obviously not a completely individual performance due to it being motivated to avoid threats to manhood and homosocial acceptance. Nevertheless, from
the narratives it was clear that there are different situational intensities of homosociality as participants also explained how some young men can also be actively encouraged and ‘dared’ to engage in heterosexual pursuit that may ultimately be intrusive to women:

Interviewer: … do you think that it’s difficult for other men, let’s say, to intervene in these situations or maybe similar situations?

Sean: I think a lot of men now as well would egg it on … He’s going, ‘I bet you won’t.’ They’d see a few girls dancing around like that there and he’d turn around and go, ‘I dare you to.’

Interviewer: And what happens if there’s friends egging some guy on and he doesn’t do anything, he doesn’t approach… what could happen then?

Sean: Might start getting teased – oh, you’re weak or no balls. That’s the big one you always hear.

The emotional rewards of following through on this encouragement are high. As Kate explains, male group members can ‘hype each other up’ in these situations, where an individual man is encouraged and tested to ‘go on boy’. Such ‘collective rituals of confidence building’ (Grazian, 2007: 229) fuel group solidarity while also injecting the individual man with self-assuredness. The reward is high, as successful interaction can confer ‘legendary’ status (Kate). As Kate rightly captures, these dynamics are less about implicit peer influence and more about direct peer pressure (Hyde et al., 2008): ‘I think that in itself just kind of brings it back to peer pressure. So you feel like now you’re going to have to do this otherwise your friends aren’t going to accept you.’

**Image-based sexual abuse**

While the ‘image’ vignette in our study depicted a scenario of revenge following the ending of a relationship, some participants drew upon knowing cases of image-based sexual abuse (McGlynn et al., 2017) that were not based on revenge but the search for homosocial validation. Conor described how a close woman friend of his had to move to a different county due to her now ex-boyfriend having shared an intimate video of them with close friends of his while they were still in a relationship. The homosocial validation of heterosexuality is obvious from the extract: ‘He showed them just because “it’s a naked girl, she’s good looking”, and “oh, look, I’m banging her”, whatever.’ This extract points to the need for more research on different forms and motives around image-based sexual abuse in Ireland and elsewhere, as Conor suggests that some images may be shared by young men not out of revenge for a break-up, but as heterosexual signifiers to amplify and reaffirm current heterosexual relationship status.

Laura similarly described the role of homosocial validation in the context of a group of young men making degrading comments about an intimate photo being shared amongst the group:
I know a case where that happened. There was like the whole GAA team. They were sending around pictures of a girl. And it was very serious… Just they all thought it was a hilarious, funny. Trying to outdo each other, impress each other.

Given the power that this behaviour can have on reaffirming homosocial bonds and raising status, intervening may be difficult:

Laura: … but are they going to stand up to the other guys and say, like, ‘what are you doing’?

[…]  

Interviewer: … what would be the reasons why they couldn’t feel like they could intervene or something?

Laura: Because these ideas of like the toxic masculinity and that. They’re not going to stand up to these lads because they think they’re going to be looked down on then as like weak… I suppose some of them have realised the severity of it. Others won’t care. You know, they’ll know it’s against their morals but they’re scared to stand up for it.

The themes embedded in this extract are consistent with those raised in the previous sections of this paper: an attempt to secure heterosexual validation, competition between men and the expectation to ‘follow the lead’ (Bird, 1996) coupled with a fear of intervening. The fact that heteromasculine homosociality cuts across different forms of abuse tells us that it is not an insignificant part of the problem of the current problem of sexual violence in Ireland, but a key component in need of interrogation.

**Homosociality and role taking**

Key to the behaviours described thus far is the simultaneous privileging of role taking with men and the neglect of the perspective of women (Quinn, 2002; Schwalbe, 1992). While participants acknowledged this in terms of young men’s (non)role taking with the specific women targeted in face-to-face situations themselves, they also perceived that a strong moderator of both young men’s socio-positive or negative behaviour within the situational demands of homosociality is linked to their role taking (Schwalbe, 1992) with *actual* women who exist *beyond* the situations themselves.

There are two variations of this theme. The first is specific and attributes part of the problem to young men’s (non)invocation of specific ‘feminist others’, which Schwalbe (1992: 47) refers to as the ‘internalized perspectives of specific women’ within the immediate social situations themselves. One variation of this sub-theme is that young men who *do* make this link are more likely to intervene: ‘I think these kind of guys are like, yeah, I have my own girlfriend or I’ve a sister’ (Aoife). A middle-ground variation is that while some young men do have close women in their lives, the problem is that they *do not* make the connection, as Michael argues in relation to ‘the idea of joking about rape amongst
men... they don’t seem to perceive that like their mother or their sister is a woman’. Another variation is that young men do not and cannot make this link because such women are or have been absent from their lives, for example, they may have ‘very few female friends’ (Michael) or ‘maybe he’s got no sisters’ (Fiona). In sum, the problem is that young men do not or somehow cannot project close feminist others (Schwalbe, 1992) in their lives onto the women who are being targeted by the situational demands of heteromasculine homosociality.

The second theme is more abstract and has to do with disparities in mixed gender socialisation and the lack of contact that some young men may have had with women through time in contrast to their contact with other men. Michael draws upon this theme heavily when talking about his witnessing of the dynamics of ‘lad culture’ at one inter-university sports competition involving teams from Ireland, the UK, the US and other European countries such as Denmark and Sweden. He described variation in the misogynistic attitudes displayed (or not) by each team. Claiming the Irish ‘were more respectful of women’ than the British and American men, he felt that ‘as the week went on, the Irish lads started to want to copy the Americans a bit more’ [our emphasis] in their masculine performances. What was troubling for him about this dynamic was that the American team embodied what he called the classic ‘jock’ archetype, ‘with their sport and their trophy wife/partner…’ Further troubling was that women were also present at the event and were treated differently by the normative masculinities held by each team: ‘With the Americans the drunker the person was, the more of a perfect prize they were, you know. And it was kind of a prize thing…’

Participants put forward several factors that moderate opportunities for mixed gender interaction. One is familial, as Carrie argued in talking about ‘lad culture’, ‘when you meet a lad who’s from a family where there’s women or anything else, you know, they do tend to have a little bit of a different perspective’. Another is geographical. Engaging in a stereotyping of rural Irish men, Michael argued that men from rural Ireland ‘have the worst views of what is acceptable to do with women, because… there isn’t the same level of socialising’ with women. The geographical similarities and differences between countries have been noted in discussions about ‘lad culture’ (Phipps, 2017) and we should be cautious about making inferences about how geographical contexts (including the rural vs. urban divide) informs these practices, particularly since this study is limited in scope.

More commonly mentioned by participants, however, was the presence of single-sex schools in Ireland, as Amy explains:

For guys I think it is really important to have like female contact because otherwise I think then that leads to them kind of othering women in a way, seeing them as completely-not as like people.

Claire, who is originally from New York, expressed having held considerable surprise at their existence when she arrived in Ireland and was quite adamant that single-sex schools are a ‘massive reason for rape culture in Ireland… they fester just awful attitudes’. The issue of single-sex schooling was recently raised by Irish Labour Senator Aodhán Ó
Ríordáin (see Moloney, 2020) who argued that segregated schooling does not help advance gender equality. He points out that in Ireland 17% of Irish primary school children attend single-gender schools while one-third of second level schools are single-gender schools. The point, as Michael highlights, however, is that it is not merely the lack of contact men may have had with women, but the persistent contact they have had with other men as since ‘they’re entirely surrounded by just other men, they get to solidify that attitude towards women’ [our emphasis].

Young people’s explanations here are consistent with the arguments made by scholars that repetitive rituals of collective homosocial practice ‘conditions men to suppress empathy for females’ (Grazian, 2007: 237). Schwalbe’s (1992) discussion on role taking is helpful for interpreting more precisely how this is the case. It may be that the lack of contact young men may have had with women diminishes opportunities to practice projective, inferential and receptive role taking with women (Schwalbe, 1992). Without this practice, what occurs is a simultaneous diminishment of young men’s engagement with the feminist generalised other, referring to the more abstract and synthesised perspective of women (Schwalbe, 1992), and the solidifying of the masculinist generalised other. The latter can ultimately lead to the internalising of the masculinist self, where objectification and harassment of women may no longer be uncomfortable, but part of a gender habitus that feels authentic to some men (Phipps, 2017; Schwalbe, 2014).

**Discussion and conclusions**

Consistent with research on male homosociality and sexual violence against women (Boswell and Spade, 1996; Quinn, 2002), young people suggest that some forms and instances of sexual harassment and violence against women in Ireland cannot be attributed solely to alcohol consumption, problematic beliefs, attitudes and simple hostility that may be held about women by individual men alone. Rather, it is also a collectively derived and sanctioned practice that reaffirms homosocial ties based on normative conceptions of what men need to ‘do’ to secure peer belonging and masculine status (Sweeney, 2014). Some instances of sexual harassment, objectification and violence are done precisely because there is a witnessing audience, an audience of male peers, whose perspectives are privileged over that of women’s. Young people’s explanations and descriptions are very similar to Bird’s (1996) study where men’s homosocial desire necessitated the enactment of meanings associated with hegemonic masculinity and the suppression of those which did not. In this paper, young people effectively describe these same dynamics, since the practices they describe are ones that align to hegemonic masculinity since they ‘institutionalize men’s dominance over women’ (Connell, 1987: 185).

Although certainly not in all cases, some young men may know that the harassment described in this paper is ‘not tolerated’ and such harassment and violence may very well be ‘against their morals’. As Quinn (2002: 400) has similarly reported in men’s ‘girl watching’, ‘the source of this contradiction lies not so much in ignorance but in acts of ignoring’. We should not believe that this ignoring and bypassing of women’s position as moral actors in their own right, however, is easy to change. This paper
suggests that some forms of sexual violence against women are as much about young men’s deeply held beliefs about themselves – such as what they must do and say to ‘become a man’ and secure belonging in deeply valued peer groups – than about women (also Quinn, 2002). For others, these forms of harassment and objectification may constitute defences against deeply hurtful peer policing, teasing and reprimand. As such, the emotional ties that are embedded within and dependent on heteromasculine performances may be difficult to untangle. Not only is refusing to perform difficult, but so too is intervening; as Bird (1996) points out, violations of norms of masculinity results in penalties to violators rather than provoking a fundamental change in the ideological basis of homosocial performances themselves. In sum, the compelling dynamics of heteromasculine homosociality (Richardson, 2010; Schwalbe, 1992) mean women’s perspectives become a secondary consideration for some young men (Robinson, 2005).

Obviously, that women’s subjectivities are ignored is not to excuse this behaviour. As Schwalbe (1992: 46) argued almost three decades ago, the goal is to enable men to engage in inferential role taking where men ‘feel with women and give equal weight to their feelings’. What we are suggesting is that focusing solely on attitudes towards women alone may not speak to the realities of the very real affective ties and pressures young men may experience within situational homosocial demands. As young people imply in this paper, it is ‘the group, not individuals’ who ‘are the bearers of gender definitions’ (Robinson, 2005: 30). As such, prevention work and interventions with men – whether through formal and informal curricula (Hickey and Fitzclarence, 2000), specific sexual violence prevention programmes (Carline et al., 2018) or bystander intervention programmes (Kaya et al., 2020) – should also focus on homosocial dynamics that privilege meanings associated with hegemonic masculinity and institutionalise young men’s dominance over women (Connell, 1987). Young men should be equipped with the skills to challenge their peers in an appropriate way, but prevention work should be sensitive both to the threat of shaming and exclusion young men may face, and how peer groups do provide an important source of belonging for young men. Yet, rather than seeing male peer groups as problems in constituting the norms that support masculinities that are conducive to violence against women, useful pedagogical work may be undertaken by practitioners and educators if peer groups are worked with and constituted as resources for the development of alternative forms of masculinities (Hickey and Fitzclarence, 2000).

Ultimately, what is required in the long term is the degenderisation of meanings (Bird, 1996), in other words, the dismantling of gendered expectations. Each form of sexual harassment and violence in this paper was not similar merely in terms of a ‘common character’ of victimisation (McGlynn et al., 2017), but also a common character of perpetration, namely, they affirm heterosexual bonds between men. It affirms Sundaram’s (2013: 891) point that prevention work should not ‘rigidly differentiate the underlying causes of multiple forms of violence because it fragments prevention work’ and instead focus on commonalities of factors which underpin violence. It is gender norms that are common to sexual violence and what is needed is an understanding that sexual objectification and heterosexuality should not constitute any worthwhile criteria by which manhood is measured.
Young people’s argument that mixed gender interaction should be encouraged is consistent with Schwalbe’s (1992) interactionist ideas on how to facilitate young men’s ability and desire to role take with women. The expansion of a mixed gender schooling system overnight in Ireland is obviously not possible and neither is it a solution, but pedagogical initiatives can be utilised to enable men to emphasise and engage with women’s perspectives (see Quinn, 2002). This work must be done early. While a focus on initiatives at HEIs in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2019) is positive, it is not adequate for broad social change, as the genesis of gendered meanings through hetero-masculine homosocial validation does not start at ‘emerging adulthood’ but is part of a process that begins long before.

Beyond policy and pedagogical initiatives, there is a pressing need for more research in Ireland on gender socialisation generally and sexual harassment and violence against women specifically. We do not have an ethnographically based grasp on both young men and women’s gender socialisation within all levels of schooling in Ireland. Much of the literature cited in this paper (e.g. Bird, 1996; Boswell and Spade, 1996; Curry, 1991; Grazian, 2007; Quinn, 2002) is based on ethnographic data involving observations and narratives of men who admit perpetrating sexual harassment and objectification. It is precisely this form of research that is useful for exposing ‘the codes that control relations among men’ (Flood, 2008: 356) and which organise men’s relations with women. Ethnographic research such as this is long overdue in Ireland, given scholarship elsewhere which shows positive changes in how male–male homosocial relations are being defined (Anderson and McCormack, 2015). The insights of young people themselves who have witnessed or experienced the socio-negative behaviour discussed in this article are important, but research (e.g. Jeffries, 2020; Nichols, 2018) on young men who actually engage in the behaviours which include but not limited to those in this article has usefully illuminated the plurality of masculinities and the complexity of ‘laddism’ in particular. Qualitative research could help unpack the contours of what ‘lad culture’ may mean in Ireland, as articulated and recounted by young people themselves, but also as observed by researchers. Research should explore its classed dimensions (Phipps, 2017) and unpack in more detail how different sites may contribute to homosocial socialisation and violence against women such as teenage discos, sports clubs and nightclubs. If violence against women is to be tackled, its gendered basis needs to be more then acknowledged, but firmly understood.

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