“Something You Just Don’t Talk About”: An Analysis of Teenage Boys’ Experiences of Non-Consensual Sexting in Lower Secondary School

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Abstract
The current study explores Swedish teenage boys’ exposure to non-consensual sexting, drawing on interviews with ninth-grade students, age 14 to 15 years, in a lower secondary school in northern Sweden. The results reveal that boys are exposed to unsolicited “dick pics,” unsolicited “female nudes” and non-consensual “explicit video” sharing via the social media platform Snapchat. However, traditional notions of heteronormativity and heterosexual masculinity prevented boys from talking about, understanding and handling experiences that may be identified as digital sexual harassment. Additionally, because of traditional gendered perceptions, students had difficulty categorizing victims and perpetrators of sexting. The study shows that there is a link between male vulnerability and male loneliness that can be manifested in both an individual and collective sense.

Keywords
non-consensual sexting, teenage boys, male vulnerability, lower secondary school, digital sexual harassment

Sebastian: I love talking about this!
Marcus: Yes, and we’ve discussed it a lot!
Edvin: Yeah, and that someone actually brings up this subject! Before, I thought it was something you just don’t talk about. That it’s something you just talk

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about with your friends. But now, we’re actually talking about it! It feels like, this is for real! (Focus group interview).

This introductory quote aims to highlight boys’ need to express emotional vulnerability and to share their stories of sexting in school—as well as the risks and violations that may come with it. This perspective is particularly important to highlight, as boys’ view of male vulnerability is very much lacking in the research exploring young people’s sexting practices. In the research, “sexting” has broadly been understood as the sending, receiving, or forwarding of self-generated and sexually explicit messages, images, or videos using mobile phones or other electronic means (e.g., Jørgensen et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016).

Over the past decade, smartphones have come to play a significant role in the lives of young people (Cooper et al., 2016). For teens, the mobile phone is an important medium for performance in everyday life, and it also provides a space for their sexual behavior (Bond, 2011). In contemporary culture, the phenomenon of sexting has become common practice among teens wishing to explore their sexuality (Madigan et al., 2018). However, the description of teen sexting conceals a range of practices. On the one hand, the experience of sexting can be explorative and romantic (Cooper et al., 2016). Revealing one’s intimate life through the camera lens can be understood as a way for people to gain power by overcoming shame, what Koskela (2002) calls “empowering exhibitionism.” On the other, it can also highlight vulnerabilities to victimization and the sexual risks young people face in relation to more abusive forms of sexting (Cooper et al., 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2019). Consequently, the practice of sending and receiving sexts without consent has been identified as a new form of digital sexual violence (e.g., Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al., 2019; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021). The Swedish Discrimination Act states that sexual harassment is “conduct of a sexual nature that violates someone’s dignity” (SFS 2008:567, p. 3). In light of this, non-consensual sexting can be seen as a form of digital sexual harassment in the Swedish context as well.

Young people’s sexting practices have been explored in a gradually growing body of international research (e.g., Barrense-Dias et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2019; Lemke & Rogers, 2020; Madigan et al., 2018). Despite this, there is still a lack of qualitative investigations looking at sexting in different educational settings (Anastassiou, 2017). In particular, there is a lack of studies exploring teenage boys’ negative experiences and vulnerabilities. The current article draws on interviews with ninth-grade students, aged 14 to 15 years, at a lower secondary school in northern Sweden. Drawing on the narratives of mainly male students, the aim of the article is to explore how boys talk about, understand, and handle exposure to non-consensual sexting. An additional aim is to consider what consequences various forms of non-consensual sexting have in their everyday school life. Despite the focus on boys, in the third and final part of the analysis, female students are also quoted in an effort to further illuminate the boys’ narratives. The following research questions have guided the investigation:
(1) What different forms of non-consensual sexting practices do boys experience?
(2) How do boys talk about, understand, and handle their experiences of non-consensual sexting in school?
(3) What social consequences emerge in the narratives when boys are subjected to non-consensual sexting?

**Literature Review**

**Youth Sexting and Gender Violence**

International research has revealed an increase in the prevalence of youth sexting during recent years. However, the field of youth sexting is unclear at present, owing to inconsistent information regarding the prevalence of sexting behaviors. Published rates of young people’s involvement in sexting range from 1.3% to 60%, according to a systematic review and meta-analysis by Madigan et al. (2018). More specifically, the prevalence of forwarding a sext without consent was 12% and the prevalence of having a sext forwarded without consent was 8.4%. Similarly, a review by Barrense-Dias et al. (2017) found that prevalence rates of youth sexting range from 9% to 60%, partly depending on the lack of consistency in how sexting is defined across surveys. A literature review by Döring (2014) found that 79% of the included papers addressed adolescent sexting as risky behavior and linked it to violence and sexual objectification as well as to negative consequences, such as being bullied by one’s peers. Note that, in Burén and Lunde’s (2018) Swedish survey study, one third of the boys reported having negative experiences of sexting. Several of the boys had been asked or pressured to sext or had received sext from strangers. Furthermore, the researchers emphasized that very little is known about these situations and how boys may react to such experiences.

Adolescents’ perceptions of sexting include a wide range of experiences of both pleasure, risk, and harm. In that way, teen sexting is remarkably varied in its meaning, context, and intention (Cooper et al., 2016). Sexting may be a way to flirt or gain romantic attention, and young people highlight experiences of pleasure and amusement, that is, of finding sexting fun (Anastassiou, 2017). However, there are also legal risks to consider. Sexting among teenagers may be prosecuted and legally punished in a variety of ways. For example, there is a risk of child pornography charges (Holoyda et al., 2018; Moritz & Christensen, 2020).

Sexting is a form of sexual exploration that we can assume will be used by teens, but the right to consent to sexting is complex, and teen sexting can take the form of revenge porn, secondary sexting, and aggravated sexting (Lemke & Rogers, 2020). According to a study by Van Ouytsel et al. (2016), there are three main ways in which teens can abuse sexts. First, a sext can be used to blackmail or coerce girls. Second, the sext can be distributed as a form of revenge after a romantic breakup. Third, sexts can be shared with peers when boys want to brag about the sexting images to their friends.
One consistent finding in Anastassiou’s (2017) qualitative review was that sexting is a gendered behavior and that the victims of sexting are mainly girls.

Sharing sexts without consent is considered the principal risk associated with teen sexting (Anastassiou, 2017). Negative psychological outcomes include feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety disorder, depression, and ultimately suicide (Cooper et al., 2016).

Naezer and van Oosterhout (2021) found that the victims of non-consensual image sharing were mostly girls, although both boys and girls were among the perpetrators. The material shared included pictures or videos, but the youth indicated that they were less inclined to forward masturbation/sex videos, because they considered this to be more private. In addition, the participants believed that enjoying looking at sexual images of females was part of boys’ nature, and they interpreted this as an excuse. A study by Hunehäll Bermdtsson and Odenbring (2021) found that image-sharing had become part of a bragging culture among the boys at the investigated school. Female pictures were used as digital “trophies” and could result in individual boys gaining status. The girls were exposed to nagging and threats when they failed to send sexting images, which put them in a vulnerable situation.

A study by Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al. (2019) indicated that boys’ and girls’ sexting activities are judged differently. Stories of boys who had been victims of sexting incidents were fewer, and such stories were also centered on ridicule rather than moral judgments. Nonetheless, both boys and girls found it humiliating to be the victim of non-consensual sext sharing. Albury (2015) showed that both boys and girls seemed equally likely to participate in sexting, but that boys had more freedom to display their bodies without risking condemnation from peers or adults.

In the research, sexting is presented as a sexed and gendered process among teens that is advantageous for boys and problematic for girls. In contrast, Setty (2020) found that young males were not equally able to extract value and social capital through sexting. Some males were at risk of social shaming for failing to meet the standards of hegemonic masculinity. The young males felt pressured to be “macho,” not show “weakness,” and hide how they feel when interacting with peers. Some of the young males distanced themselves from sexting and constructed alternative heterosexual masculinities because they perceived the activity as risky.

Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) found that the sending and receiving of “dick pics” (images of male penises) appeared to be normalized among teens. The male teens in their study seemed to be completely unaware of how females in the peer group experienced receiving unsolicited dick pics. Similarly, Haslop and O’Rourke (2021) found that receiving unsolicited sexts is perceived to be a common practice between students at a university in England. The results indicate that female students are more likely to be targets of online sexual harassment, such as receiving unsolicited dick pics from male students.

Privacy, consent, and trust constitute an online problem, and for this reason, Nissenbaum (2011, 2004) has developed a theory of “privacy as contextual integrity,” in which context is crucial to understanding whether a specific action constitutes a violation of privacy in the digital media space.
To summarize, previous research has shown that various forms of sexting practices are an integral part of youth culture. Earlier studies have largely highlighted the gendered nature of teen sexting as well as the sexual double standard regarding boys’ and girls’ sexting practices. In particular, previous research has portrayed teenage girls as being vulnerable to sexting. Still, we know very little about teenage boys’ vulnerabilities to this phenomenon. There is a clear lack of knowledge regarding teen boys’ experiences and vulnerabilities to sexting in educational settings. Hence, the present study hopes to generate knowledge about teenage boys’ exposure to non-consensual sexting in a Swedish school setting.

**School Bullying, Victimization, and Masculinity**

Research on bullying, victimization, and male vulnerability is also an important theme in the present article. A longitudinal study by Van Ouytsel et al. (2019) found significant relationships between sexting and traditional offline bullying victimization. Previous research has shown that school bullying is a gendered phenomenon (Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018; Eriksen & Lyng, 2018; Graham, 2016; Horton, 2019). According to Carrera-Fernández et al. (2018), bullying often involves performing hegemonic masculinities and femininities at school. They found that while young people imitate and reproduce gender norms, they also punish those who deviate from these norms. A study by Odenbring and Johansson (2021) suggested that although teasing, joking and fighting for “fun” are part of boys’ daily life in lower secondary school, there is a possibility that this behavior will cross a thin line and turn into harassment or violence. Such behavior may also contain hidden verbal insults intended to marginalize others, placing some boys in a vulnerable position. Horton (2019) investigated the experiences of a bullied ninth-grade boy in Vietnam and demonstrated that the bullying was influenced by contextual masculinity norms.

According to Strindberg et al. (2020), school bullying is relational and situational. Their study revealed that social vulnerability is a key factor in understanding both why students engage in bullying and why they fail to intervene or defend the victim. Relational aggression is often considered a problem among girls. However, boys are just as likely as girls to use relational bullying, for example to damage the reputation of peers (Graham, 2016). A study by Eriksen and Lyng (2018) found that, although relational aggression occurs among boys, it may go unnoticed at school because boys hardly talk about the difficulties with relational aggression they face. Boys also do not show the hurt they feel when they are subject to rumor-spreading or exclusion, due to western culture’s gendered norms about expressing one’s feelings.

One significant factor that consistently predicts school bullying is being “different” from the larger peer group in some respect (Graham, 2016). In a study by Thornberg and Delby (2019), lower secondary school students explained that those who bully construct their victims in terms of differentness. Being labeled as “deviant” by peers and being socially constructed as “uncool” or “wrong” through rumor-spreading and social exclusion were considered to result in a low-status victim position that was extremely difficult to get out of. Merten (1996) highlighted the vulnerability of
nonaggressive teenage boys who had been rejected by their peers at school. The article presents the rejection process and the boys’ responses to their rejection, as well as discussing how the boys tried to figure out why their peers had rejected them. Carlile (2008) showed that students at risk of or subject to permanent exclusion from school are linked to a process that is often gendered and consistent with “compulsory heterosexuality.” Normed understandings of gender have a profound effect on the judgments made about students.

To summarize, recent research has suggested that school bullying and peer victimization are gendered phenomena. In addition, school bullying and peer victimization are presented as relational. Boys are found to be involved in relational aggression just as girls are, although it may be difficult to perceive due to masculinity norms. Thus, the current study hopes to generate knowledge about how male students’ experiences of non-consensual sexting among peers can be related to victimization and male vulnerability in the school setting.

The Concepts of Heteronormativity and Male Vulnerability

In the present study, I find it important to explore and critically discuss male students’ experiences and understanding of non-consensual sexting in everyday school life by analyzing these phenomena in relation to heteronormativity as well as male vulnerability and agency. It is important because previous research has often indicated that young people construct non-consensual sexting practices in a heteronormative way and that boys are presumed to be less negatively affected.

There are multiple definitions tied to the term heteronormativity (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Here, I make use of Butler’s concept of presumptive heterosexuality and operate with the understanding that gender and sexuality are intertwined (Butler, 1990; Marchia & Sommer, 2019). In an early work, Butler (1990) used the term “heterosexual matrix” to highlight the notion that heterosexuality is an important element of what constitutes a normative way of performing gender. Consequently, the heterosexual matrix creates and consolidates gender through people, who construct themselves as heterosexual by expressing masculinity and femininity in the manner society expects. Women and men are seen as binary opposites, and men’s and women’s gender performativity is produced in relation to a normative heterosexuality. Men and women are also expected to desire each other and enter into sexual relations. Hence, within this framework, homosexuality remains an anomaly, and homophobia helps maintain and produce heteronormativity (Butler, 1990).

The concept of the heterosexual matrix aims to problematize society’s depiction of heterosexuality as normative. In that respect, Butler’s theory is helpful in understanding how the power of heteronormativity affects the constitution of society and social life (Butler, 1990). In the current article, I use the concept of heteronormativity as a theoretical framework to investigate teenagers’ non-consensual sexting practices in relation to a presumptive heterosexuality. In this light, sexting and digital sexual harassment in school can be understood as social acts that are embedded, produced, and regulated within the framework of heteronormativity.
Central to the present study is also the concept of **vulnerability**. From a theoretical perspective, Butler’s concept of vulnerability has multifaceted relationships with resistance, and vulnerability and resistance should be seen as intertwined. Drawing on Butler’s (2016) theory of vulnerability, I use the concepts of vulnerability and resistance here as tools to explore how boys in lower secondary school reflect on and experience non-consensual sexting (Butler, 2016). Butler’s concept runs counter to traditional understandings of vulnerability that link it to inactivity and passivity. On the contrary, from Butler’s point of view, the vulnerable are not merely victims in need of help and being rescued. Instead, according to Butler, the human body is relational and interdependent; it is exposed to complex environments and dependent on social relations and networks of support. Vulnerable subjects or vulnerable populations are the outcomes of a history of power relations and systems of domination (Butler, 2016; Checchi, 2017).

Butler (2016) also emphasized that we undergo “linguistic vulnerability” and states: “One clear dimension of our vulnerability has to do with our exposure to name-calling and discursive categories in infancy and childhood—indeed, throughout the course of life” (p. 16). In Butler’s view, there is a dual dimension of performativity, in that we are invariably acted on by things and we also act upon them. Performativity cannot, therefore, be reduced to the idea of free and individual performance, as we live in a world of descriptions and categories. In this way we are, according to Butler: “vulnerable to, and affected by, discourses that we never chose” (p. 25). Discourses on gender produce a set of gendered ideals and social norms. Gender norms act on us, and we reproduce them. Vulnerability is understood by Butler to entail deliberate exposure to power. Vulnerability produces resistance, but there is also a resistance to vulnerability. Vulnerability is part of resistance, and it can emerge within resistance. Butler wrote: “Once we understand the way vulnerability enters into agency, then our understanding of both terms can change, and the binary opposition between them can become undone. I consider the undoing of this binary a feminist task” (p. 25). In other words, Butler’s perspective on the term vulnerability does not rob people of their agency (Butler, 2016).

In the current article, I use Butler’s concept of vulnerability as a tool to critically discuss and explore male vulnerability, resistance, and agency in the realm of youth sexting among peers in the investigated school. According to Connell (2000), there is a widespread belief in society that it is natural for males, in contrast to females, to be violent—that the notion of “boys will be boys” is natural and a result of male hormones. However, this biological essentialism is not credible, and the main cause of gender violence can be found in social masculinities. Theoretically, Connell (2000) emphasized the obvious: “When we speak statistically of “men” having higher rates of violence than women, we must not slide to the inference that therefore all men are violent” (p. 215). The present study follows Connell’s (2020) view that boyhood is a terrain with changing boundaries and characteristics, in which boys are “active participants in a gendered world they did not create but had to move through” (p. 17). In light of gender and sexuality in everyday school life, the present article investigates male vulnerability to non-consensual sexting.
**Method and Methodology**

The present study is part of a national research project funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (grant number 2017-00071). The project was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board (application number 244-18) in the spring of 2018. Due to ethical considerations, all participants received an information letter detailing the purpose of the study. Students who wished to participate in the project then gave their written consent. If a student was under 15 years of age, a guardian had to sign the consent form on the student’s behalf. Ethical information was provided to the students at the beginning of each interview. To ensure confidentiality, the names of all participating students, the name of the school, and the name of the city where the school is located have been anonymized using pseudonyms (The Swedish Research Council, 2017).

The current study was designed as a qualitative case study of a single school (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). The interviews were conducted at Amethyst School, a lower secondary school in northern Sweden. Amethyst School enrolls approximately 400 students from sixth to ninth grade, age 13 to 16 years. The investigated school is located on the outskirts of a medium-sized city, and the catchment area of the school consists primarily of single-family houses. Statistically, the average annual income as well as the overall educational level is close to the national average (Statistics Sweden, 2020). The school’s catchment area can be described as predominantly middle class.

In total, five focus group interviews, eight individual interviews, one follow-up focus group interview, and one pair interview were conducted during September 2019. A total of 18 students from a ninth-grade school class were interviewed. The students themselves identified their gender. All students identified in line with the traditional gender binary. Fourteen boys and four girls participated in the study. All focus groups were organized and divided by the students’ teachers in agreement with the students’ own wishes, the goal being to create a safe conversational climate in each group. This meant that two of the focus groups consisted of both boys and girls because of the bonds of friendship between these students. The composition of focus groups was intended to protect students, given the sensitive nature of the interviews (The Swedish Research Council, 2017). However, not all focus groups consisted of close friends.

Each focus group included three to four students. After the initial focus group interviews, the students could choose whether they wanted to be interviewed individually, in pairs or in a group with friends. The focus group interviews lasted up to 2 hours, the individual interviews up to 1 hour, and the pair interview lasted 1 hour (cf. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interview guide included semi-structured questions covering broad themes related to students’ experiences of peer relations, violence, threats, sexting, and digital sexual harassment in school, as well as to whom the students turned for support. The advantage of a semi-structured approach is that the central themes of the interview guide allow freedom to explore novel directions when they arise. Methodologically, the questions were open in nature, as it was important to give the students the
opportunity to retell narratives and reflect on situations they had experienced in their everyday school life—both jointly with peers and individually. This approach allows participants to detail their experiences. Nevertheless, semi-structured interviews require a balance between structure and a relaxed atmosphere, as well as an awareness of the power symmetry that exists between the interviewer and the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The length of the interviews, the range of various themes discussed as well as the combination of focus group interviews, individual interviews, and a pair interview helped establish rapport and trust.

The case study design allowed for in-depth and rich data collection in the students’ real-life setting; the participants wholeheartedly shared their feelings and experiences of their everyday school life (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2014). All participating boys were familiar with the phenomenon of youth sexting, but not all boys shared the same number of experiences of various sexting activities. Overall, the boys had the courage to openly share their vulnerability during the interviews, and they could reflect on both their own and others’ experiences of different situations related to sexting. However, in the third and final part of the analysis, quotes from girls have also been included to further explore the boys’ narratives.

In the present study, thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns in the data, using the six analytical phases developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a methodological tool. In line with this methodological approach, all interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed, thus allowing a thematic analysis to be conducted. It should be emphasized that thematic analysis is not a linear process. Rather, it is a recursive process that enables the researcher to move back and forth between the phases. The strength of this particular form of thematic analysis is also that it enables theoretical interests to drive the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The theoretical interests driving the present study follow Butler’s (1990, 2016) concepts of vulnerability and heteronormativity.

In narrowing the themes, I first searched for patterns and nuances in the narratives that could help me understand the experience of sexting from the young boys’ perspectives. In that process of interpreting and analyzing, I then began searching for themes and sub-themes in the male participants’ narratives about sexting that were related to male vulnerability intertwined with resistance and agency as well as heteronormativity (Butler, 1990, 2016) in their everyday school life. I conducted the thematic analysis using the following phases: (1) become familiar with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts, searching for patterns and taking notes; (2) conduct initial coding of the data by identifying all the material that specifically relates to “sexting” in the interviews; (3) organize and sort different codes into themes and sub-themes; (4) review and refine selected themes, and organize the data into a thematic map of different themes; (5) define and name the themes that will be presented in the analysis and identify the “story” that each theme tells about the data; and (6) write-up the results in an article (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). During the analytical process, three main themes were discerned. The results will be presented according to these themes, which are: (1) Unsolicited “dick pics”; (2) Unsolicited “female nudes,” and (3) Non-consensual “explicit video” sharing.
Vulnerabilities Boys Face Within the School’s Sexting Culture

Unsolicited “Dick Picks”

Boys’ experiences of unsolicited “dick pics” (photos of male penises) will be explored in this section. A previous study found that the practice of sending dick pics non-consensually to females is normalized among teenagers (Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019). According to the students at Amethyst School, dick pics are something the girls at school are constantly exposed to. Viktor, for example, says the following in an individual interview: “It seems that girls are so much more vulnerable” (to unsolicited dick pics), “and that many of them feel bad about it—many of the girls.” However, the following quote from a focus group interview shows that boys are also exposed to dick pics:

Hjalmar: Yes, I have received a DP (dick pic)! Yes, I have!/. . ./With guys, I’ve tried to be a little funny and have a conversation with them after the picture just to. . . Well, I write to them just to make fun of them.

Interviewer: What do you say to them?

Hjalmar: “Oh wow, it’s so tiny!” Or: “Oh my, it’s so big!”

Interviewer: Do you get any response to that?

Hjalmar: Sometimes—and sometimes not.

All the boys: “Laughter”

Edvin: What if it’s someone you know! OH NO! And the next day, they give you these weird looks!

Hjalmar: Well, it can last for a while. But then I remove them (block) one hundred percent.

Interviewer: Since this is a common phenomenon, it’s interesting to know how you handle it.

Hjalmar: Yes, well, it’s not like I would ever show a friend and just: “Check this out!” (Focus group interview)

In a focus group composed of close friends, Hjalmar opens up about his experience of, and reaction to, receiving unsolicited dick pics via Snapchat. Hjalmar does not know who is sending them. But in the discussion that follows, these friends express suspicions that it may be “some horny old man” or boys at school who send dick pics for the purpose of offending other boys. Interestingly, they never consider that the sender might be female. In Butler’s (2016) view, vulnerability produces resistance, but vulnerability can also emerge within resistance. Hjalmar’s aim to provoke the anonymous sender(s) can be seen as an act of resistance to sexual violence. By replying to the sender(s), he wants to make it clear that he refuses to be diminished by other males. It can also be seen as a defense of his heterosexual masculinity (Butler, 1990, 2016). However, Hjalmar’s act of resistance evokes strong reactions from his male friends. Hjalmar’s friends’ first reaction is to laugh, but at the same time they express concern
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on Hjalmar’s behalf about the social consequences at school if Hjalmar’s heterosexual masculinity were to be questioned. This example shows the power of heteronormativity (Butler, 1990) in the lives of young boys by indicating that there is a thin line that boys must not cross when joking about their own sexual orientation. Consequently, their agency is constrained, and they have trouble defending themselves against this type of sexual violation, because homophobia helps maintain and produce heteronormativity (Butler, 1990, 2016). Ludvig, the only boy in the present study who describes himself as openly bisexual, receives a lot of dick pics; he says this is “probably” due to his sexual orientation (Focus group interview). Ludvig assumed that the unsolicited images were intended as a form of homophobic harassment because his sexual orientation was known at school. He felt safe talking about this because he participated in a focus group consisting of his close female friends. In his case, unsolicited dick pics can be understood as a homophobic violation: a method used to degrade those who do not display heterosexual masculinity in the heteronormative school environment (Butler, 1990). Ludvig’s constrained resistance was mainly described in relation to him not opening all the Snaps he received, his aim being to avoid seeing unsolicited dick pics or homophobic comments.

Overall, it is clear that experiencing dick pics is a phenomenon male friends do not discuss with each other. In the following quote, Casper reflects on why it is so difficult for young people to talk about their experiences of unsolicited dick pics:

Casper: You may not dare to tell. If you get such a picture, you may not dare to tell everyone.
Interviewer: No exactly, and why is that, do you think?
Casper: You might feel ashamed.

Interviewer: How do you mean?
Casper: That it’s hard to talk about, because you don’t want that picture. (Focus group interview)

Another aspect of heteronormativity in western culture (Butler, 1990) is that boys learn not to share feelings when performing traditional heterosexual masculinity. Or as Marcus puts it in a focus group discussion about why boys find it so difficult to show emotions in school: “You don’t feel like a man—for example, when you cry. You don’t want to show emotions!” He emphasizes this by saying: “It makes you feel weak!” On the whole, it is more culturally acceptable for girls to express emotions. The present results indicate that, for boys, dealing with unsolicited dick pics is complex. Male peers do not talk with anyone about their experiences of and emotions upon receiving unsolicited dick pics, even if they feel vulnerable. That boys “may not dare to tell” could also be understood as a concern about being misidentified as gay in a heteronormative school environment where homosexuality is perceived as an anomaly (Butler, 1990). In the case of sexual violence, male loneliness becomes a problem because people are interdependent when they are exposed to complex situations, and they need social relations and networks of support to face vulnerabilities (Butler, 2016).
The results show that unsolicited dick pics are a form of non-consensual sexting that boys are exposed to. These narratives reveal how heteronormative perceptions concerning sexuality and masculinity affect boys’ agency negatively and prevent them from dealing with sexual violations (cf. Butler, 1990, 2016). The social consequences of male vulnerability in these situations are male loneliness and social alienation.

**Unsolicited “Female Nudes”**

“Female nudes” is another aspect of unsolicited sexting that has been identified in the narratives of the boys from Amethyst School. In the following quote, Arvid shares his experiences of when female peers sent him self-produced nude images without asking:

> Interviewer: How did it happen? Did they ask you if you wanted to share nudes?
> Arvid: No, no, no! They never asked if I wanted to share nudes! It’s like this: These are girls I’ve had something going on with. And then just . . . out of nowhere when I open my Snapchat, a nude picture comes up! (Focus group interview)

During the interviews, it becomes clear that receiving unsolicited female nudes is a form of sexting experience boys do not know how to assess or handle. The most common feeling the boys say they experience in these situations is that of being “shocked”—they say it feels “weird” or “odd.” In the conversations with the boys, unsolicited sexting was perceived as sexual harassment, but only if the victims were girls. For example, Marcus says emphatically: “I think it’s disrespectful. If you haven’t asked, then it’s disrespectful to send such a picture to someone (a girl) who doesn’t want a (nude) picture” (Focus group interview). The boys at the investigated school have a clear view that it is inappropriate for males to send unsolicited nude images to female peers; they say they understand how a girl might feel and react in such a situation. A study by Ricciardelli and Adorjan (2019) revealed the opposite, however, namely that boys seemed completely unaware of how females in their peer group were experiencing receiving unwanted sexting images. The boys in their study used the adjective “weird” to describe how male teens could be perceived if they were to send unsolicited nudes. Although the boys in the current study could view girls’ experiences of unsolicited sexting as degrading, they lack the ability to comprehend similar situations as disrespectful when they themselves receive nude images from girls they know:

> Interviewer: How do you react? Do you block them?
> Edvin: But that’s exactly the thing—you don’t know what to do! It all depends on who it is! I mean, listen. . .
> Hjalmar: If you’ve had a conversation through Snaps with that person for a while. . .
> Edvin: Yes, when you write to each other.
> Hjalmar: Yes.
> Edvin: In that situation, it’s very difficult to know what to do!
Interviewer: Because it’s a girl you’ve been in contact with?
Edvin: Yes, you know the person! / . . . Then you don’t know what to do and how to respond!
Hjalmar: Exactly, it’s kind of “flattering”. . . right?! (Focus group interview)

The participants report not knowing how to perceive unsolicited nudes sent by girls, and that it is therefore “very difficult” for them to know how to act in these situations. In other words, the boys do not know how they are supposed to feel, react, or handle non-consensual sexting. The analysis of the narratives shows that boys have no tools to use in deciding whether unsolicited nudes should be perceived as flattering or whether they should block the girl in the same way as they describe girls doing with boys who send unsolicited nudes. These teenagers have no knowledge of whether “boys” can be subjected to violence by “girls.” Nonetheless, their feelings of “shock” and that it is “odd” and “weird,” along with their uncertainty about whether they should block the girl from their social media, indicate that these are not pleasant experiences and that the boys feel vulnerable (cf. Butler, 2016).

In relation to Swedish legislation (SFS 2008:567), these narratives highlight a vulnerable spot: boys not knowing that female nudes can be categorized as a form of sexual harassment. This fact also highlights something significant regarding young people’s views on gender in contemporary culture: the widespread societal belief that there are “male perpetrators” and “female victims”—that is, that males are violent, in contrast to females, as a result of nature and male hormones (Connell, 2000). Young people also tend to believe that it is part of boys’ nature to enjoy watching sexual images of females (e.g., Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021). In the present study, the interviews reveal a binary and traditional view of gender in school culture, and for this reason, the boys do not know how to perceive and handle female nudes because, in contemporary culture, boys are not seen as being vulnerable to sexual violence (cf. Butler, 1990, 2016; Connell, 2000). As a result, the boys do not talk about themselves as victims of sexting.

Non-Consensual “Explicit Video” Sharing

In this section, a specific case of a vulnerable boy will be used to highlight students’ difficulties in categorizing victims and perpetrators of sexting—difficulties caused by traditional gendered perceptions. Reportedly, a girl named Tess, with the help of her friends, tricked a new boy named Nils into sexting with her by sending him explicit material she downloaded and edited to make it look like her. According to Tess’s close friends, Tess repeatedly sent sexts to Nils until he responded to the invitation by sending a masturbation video of himself. Ludvig, one of the friends involved, describes the reason for Tess’s behavior in a focus group interview by saying: “It was like this, she didn’t like him. She disliked him very much. And that’s why she wanted to frame him—by getting hold of this video.” In the following quote, Tess’s friends give a detailed description of how they helped Tess record the sexting video Nils sent to her via Snapchat:
Ludvig: Mm, I was the one who recorded it. Because if she (Tess) had recorded it with her phone, he (Nils) would have seen that she recorded it.

Elsa: He filmed her mobile phone. I mean he was filming with his phone on her phone when he (Nils). . .

Interviewer: Oh, I understand, because if she had recorded it herself, he would have understood that she had recorded it?

Ludvig: Yes.

Lilly: Yes, you can see it on the screen.

Interviewer: Okay, so you filmed the video when it came to her phone?

Ludvig: Yes.

Interviewer: I see.

Lilly: It goes fast when it comes up on the screen, and if you take a screenshot on a Snap that someone sends to you, then the person sees it.

Interviewer: Does he know about this now, that this video exists?

Ludvig: Yes, he does. (Focus group interview)

Tess and her friends recorded the private sexting video, but it did not end there. The video was then shared among students in the class:

Sebastian: He (Nils) has sent a DICK PIC! A video!

Edvin: Yes, a video when he jerks off.

Marcus: To Tess.

Edvin: Yes.

/./ . . /

Marcus: That video was shared! I’ve seen that video!

Sebastian: Yes!

Interviewer: Have you all seen it?

All the boys: YES!!

/./ . . /

Interviewer: Are you sure it’s him in the video?

All the boys: Yes!

Edvin: Yes, there’s no doubt! (Focus group interview)

Nils sent his intimate video to Tess in confidence, but his private sext was shared among other students. This can be seen not only as a betrayal of privacy and trust, but also as a form of “dick pic shaming” and public humiliation at school. Furthermore, not all students were aware of the circumstances surrounding this explicit video sharing, that is, not all students knew that initially Nils did not send the video to Tess as an unsolicited “dick pic video” (see Nissenbaum, 2004, 2011).

In a heteronormative school climate (Butler, 1990) where girls are constantly considered the targets of harmful sexting—seen as a form of gender-based violence against females in youth sexting culture (e.g., Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021)—no one seems to consider Tess and her friends’ non-consensual sharing of the video inappropriate. Societal discourses produce a set of notions of gender that act on us, but
we also reproduce these notions (Butler, 1990, 2016). Butler (2016) noted that: “We are called names and find ourselves living in a world of categories and descriptions” (p. 24). Societal categorization of “female vulnerability” to the category sexual harassment and of “males as perpetrators” to the category sexual violence (Connell, 2000) may very well be the reason why Tess’s actions are not questioned at school. Consequently, this act of video sharing is not just a public humiliation, it also portrays Nils as an alleged perpetrator of digital sexual harassment.

Interviewer: Does this affect his reputation, do you think?
Sebastian: Yes!
Hjalmar: Yes, it does!
Edvin: Yes indeed!
Marcus: Hell, yes! (Focus group interview)

Nils has not been a student at the investigated school for very long. Still, Nils is described as bullied and ostracized by his classmates for various reasons, and he has no friends in class. For Nils, the consequences of having been subjected to sexting abuse are significant. Butler (2016) highlighted the notion of “linguistic vulnerability,” which refers to our exposure to name-calling and discursive categories as one clear dimension of vulnerability (p. 16). According to Butler (2016), vulnerability involves deliberate exposure to power, and words have power. After watching the intimate video, the girls in school consider Nils “disgusting,” and they say they are “keeping their distance” from him. Ebba emphasizes that: “I don’t want such a video sent to me! So, I stay away from him! I don’t want to be near him at all!” Ebba says this despite the fact that she knows this was caused by Tess’s maliciously behavior: “She (Tess) was the one who did it! She made him send this video!” (Individual interview).

These derogatory opinions are expressed in powerful words, and the interviews indicate that Nils’ reputation has been negatively affected by the actions of Tess and her friends. It also indicates that, regardless of whether the students know the underlying story of Tess and her friends’ involvement, Nils’ is still perceived as a “male perpetrator” capable of sexual harassment, and not as a victim of sexual harassment himself. Within the framework of vulnerability and the “heterosexual matrix,” this can be understood as both a boy’s vulnerability to gendered categorizations and the descriptions of heterosexual masculinity (Butler, 1990, 2016) and “male violence” (Connell, 2000) that are embedded in society. Youth culture is social by its very nature. Alarmingly, the social consequences for this boy are that he is rejected by his peer group. The results show how young people’s preconceived notions of gender and sexuality can ruin an individual boy’s everyday life at school. Accordingly, this is also associated with a risk of psychological stress and harm, depression, or even suicide ideation (Cooper et al., 2016).

Discussion and Conclusion

The present article has highlighted some of the vulnerabilities boys face within the local sexting culture at a lower secondary school in northern Sweden. In particular, the
results indicate that boys are vulnerable to experiences such as unsolicited dick pics, unsolicited female nudes, and non-consensual sext sharing. In contrast to most studies addressing sexting as a form of sexual violence among teens, the present study highlighted boys’ experiences as victims.

The results showed that a traditional notion of heteronormativity and heterosexual masculinity prevented boys from talking about, understanding, and dealing with negative sexting experiences, such as dick pics and female nudes. In addition, the findings revealed that, in a heteronormative school environment, boys are not recognized as vulnerable in situations where they receive unsolicited nudes from girls (cf. Butler, 1990, 2016). Consequently, the boys did not talk about themselves as victims of sexting, although they did express feelings of insecurity, confusion and discomfort about their vulnerable position in unpleasant situations. It is clearly stereotypical thinking to believe that boys would appreciate unsolicited nudes from girls without feeling emotionally violated.

In the case when one boy’s sexting video was shared among classmates, the vulnerable boy was portrayed as the perpetrator, even by students who knew that the girl had encouraged the boy to send the intimate video to her so that she could “dick pic shame” and humiliate him in public. The girl, on the other hand, was not categorized as a perpetrator by her classmates. Social exclusion from the peer group was the consequence for this particular boy, and it put him in an extremely vulnerable position at school. These findings indicate that young people’s traditional notions of binary gender categories (Butler, 1990)—of “male perpetrators” and “female victims” (Connell, 2000)—are deeply rooted. The results of the present study indicate that, for boys, sexting may become a risk and a problem when they cannot defend themselves against non-consensual sexting or alleged accusations of digital sexual harassment.

The contribution of the current article is the insight it gives into boys’ experiences of, and reflections on, non-consensual sexting. The narratives from Amethyst School take up the complexities and contradictions of real life in a school setting (Flyvbjerg, 2006). According to previous researchers, very little is known about boys’ harmful experiences of sexting and how boys react to these experiences (Burén & Lunde, 2018). During the interviews, it became clear that boys have a great need to talk about sexting and that they are very insightful about their experiences. However, what has also been revealed here is that boys lack the tools to comprehend the vulnerabilities they face in youth sexting culture. Moreover, boys lack support and knowledge about how to perceive and deal with experiences that can be identified as digital sexual harassment, according to the Swedish Discrimination Act (SFS 2008:567). One conclusion that can be drawn from these findings is that there is a link between male vulnerability and male loneliness that can be manifested in both an individual and collective sense. Thus, the present findings raise critical questions about boys’ well-being.

In both qualitative and quantitative research, harmful sexting has proved to be a gendered behavior, and it is often girls who fall victim to sexting (e.g., Anastassiou, 2017; Cooper et al., 2016). Gender equality issues, such as sexual double standards, are problems that must be taken seriously. However, doing so involves recognizing that boys may be victims as well. It is not always the quantification of gender-based violence—males having higher rates of violence than females—that is important to
emphasize, but the well-being of all students. Just as Connell (2000) pointed out: “It is a fact of great importance, both theoretically and practically, that there are many non-violent men in the world” (p. 215). Teen sexting as a field of research is gradually growing. Nonetheless, the field is clearly lacking in qualitative investigations that explore sexting in different educational settings from boys’ perspectives. Other studies have emphasized the importance of educating young people, professionals, and parents about the multifaceted nature of sexting (e.g., Cooper et al., 2016; Jørgensen et al., 2019; Lemke & Rogers, 2020; Madigan et al., 2018; Van Ouytsel et al., 2014). As an addition to the ongoing discussion on sexting prevention, here I would like to draw attention to boys’ need for support and education concerning male vulnerabilities in situations when experiences of sexting become emotionally violent. It is my hope that the present article will contribute knowledge about both boys’ vulnerabilities when they are subjected to digital sexual harassment and the effects this form of harassment has on their daily life at school.

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