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# Only sluts love sexting: youth, sexual norms and non-consensual sharing of digital sexual images

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## ABSTRACT

Interventions aimed at preventing non-consensual sharing of digital sexual images among youth often focus on (potential) victims, who are discouraged from making and sharing such images. This approach is problematic, however: it limits young people's sexual freedom, encourages victim-blaming in case of incidents, and makes perpetrators invisible. This article contributes to scholarship that shifts the focus to perpetrators, by investigating young people's motives for distributing other people's sexual images without their consent. Based on interviews with Dutch young perpetrators, victims and bystanders of non-consensual image sharing, we distinguish different scenarios of and motives for this type of sexual violence. The analysis demonstrates that non-consensual image sharing is a layered, heterogenous problem that is deeply embedded in present-day social norms regarding gender and sexuality. By disentangling the different scenarios of and motives for non-consensual image sharing as well as the gendered sexual norms and taboos that play a role, we hope to inspire the development of sex(ting)-positive, nuanced and diverse interventions for preventing this type of image-based abuse. More research is still needed, however, and in the conclusion we provide several directions for future research.

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Youth; social media; sexting; sexual violence; perpetrators

## Introduction

Social media provide young people with new opportunities for undertaking sexual activities, for instance through sexting: making and sending sexually explicit messages, especially images, via the Internet (Hasinoff & Shepherd, 2014; Symons, Ponnet, Walrave, & Heirman, 2018). Even though research has demonstrated that sexting can contribute to different dimensions of young people's sexual development (e.g. Burkett, 2015; Naezer, 2018b; Strohmaier, Murphy, & DeMatteo, 2014; Symons et al., 2018), there is also the risk of other people distributing the message without the original maker's consent. While consensual sexting can be considered as normal sexual behaviour that is an expression of sexual agency, exploration and expression (Naezer, 2018b; Symons et al., 2018), the non-consensual sharing of sexual materials is a form of sexual violence or abuse (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2016; Henry & Powell, 2016; McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017; K. Walker & Sleath, 2017).

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In the Netherlands, where the present study was conducted, non-consensual image sharing was not explicitly punishable by law until 2020, but it could be prosecuted based on laws against defamation (*belediging*), slander (*laster*), libel (*smaad*) or child pornography.<sup>1</sup> Since 1 January 2020, the abuse of sexual images has been explicitly labelled as a criminal offence.<sup>2</sup> In 2020, the Dutch government will further 'modernize' laws regarding online and offline sexual offences including image-based abuse.<sup>3</sup>

Interventions aimed at preventing non-consensual image sharing often focus on (potential) victims. Young people, especially girls, are discouraged from making and sharing sexual images (Renold, Ringrose, & Egan, 2015, p. 3–5). Also in the Netherlands, a country that is generally known for its liberal and positive attitude towards young people and sexuality (Krebbekx, 2018; Lewis & Knijn, 2002; Schalet, 2011; Weaver, Smith, & Kippax, 2005), responses to sexting are, paradoxically, rather conservative and often aimed at abstinence. For instance, one Dutch Public Health Service (GGD Hollands Midden) launched a campaign in February 2020 telling young people not to send images of their genitals, but to use emoticons such as the peach and the aubergine instead, in order to 'protect themselves' against sextortion.<sup>4</sup> A similar advice was also given by the Dutch police in 2018, who called upon youth to 'stop sexting'.<sup>5</sup>

Such advices not only limit young people's sexual freedom, but also encourage victim-blaming in case of incidents, by placing responsibility for (preventing) the distribution of the images with the (potential) victim rather than (potential) perpetrators, as has been demonstrated by scholars in their analyses of young people's sexting narratives (Burkett, 2015; Salter, 2016; Setty, 2019b), media representations of sexting (Crofts, Lee, McGovern, & Milivojevic, 2015; McGovern & Lee, 2018), sex(ting) education (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Salter, Crofts, & Lee, 2013), legal responses to non-consensual image sharing (K. Walker & Sleath, 2017), and teachers' and pupils' responses to a case of non-consensual image sharing in their school (Krebbekx, 2018, pp. 63–81).

Moreover, the advice to stop sexting in order to prevent image-based abuse makes those who are actually responsible invisible, namely the perpetrators: people who share other people's sexual images without their consent. In order to respond more adequately to the problem of non-consensual image sharing, scholars have argued that we need to shift our focus from (potential) victims to (potential) perpetrators and the context that enables this type of sexual violence (Angelides, 2013; Karaian, 2014; Lee & Crofts, 2015; Naezer, 2018a; Setty, 2019c). With this article, we want to contribute to this shift by identifying the different scenarios of and motives for non-consensual image sharing among Dutch youth, and by analysing the role of present-day sexual norms and taboos in the experiences of young perpetrators, victims and bystanders.

## Non-consensual image sharing

Image-based abuse may take many different forms. Images may be produced non-consensually: people may be forced or talked into making and/or sending sexual images of themselves, sexual images may be made without a person's knowledge (e.g. upskirting, downblousing) and/or consent (e.g. child pornography), or images may be photoshopped or deepfaked. Also, images that were made consensually may be stolen (e.g. through hacking). Furthermore, both consensually and non-consensually produced images may be shared without a person's consent, and/or be used to blackmail that person (sextortion). Finally, people may receive unsolicited and unwanted sexual images (e.g. 'dick pics').

In the present article, we mainly focus on one type of image-based abuse, namely the non-consensual sharing of other people's images. In most of the cases which we discussed with research participants, the images were originally made and shared consensually, but were then non-consensually shared with others. This sharing was done in different ways: by sending the images directly to a third party, by uploading them to an online platform, or by physically showing them to other people on a phone or a desktop.

In their international meta-analysis of 39 studies about sexting among youth under 18 published between 2009 and 2016, Madigan, Ly, Rash, Ouytsel, and Temple (2018) found that the mean prevalence for sending and receiving sexts was 14.8% and 27.4% respectively. Of these 39 studies, 8 provided information about non-consensual image sharing. On average, these studies found that 12% of teenagers under 18 had forwarded an image without consent of the original sender and 8.4% had had their images forwarded without their consent. Madigan and colleagues do not specify the sex-distribution, but do conclude that the prevalence of sexting and non-consensual image sharing is not moderated by sex. They warn however that the samples of the studies they analysed were often small. Moreover, the percentages were described in articles dating from 2009–2015, so considering the increasing social media use among youth, both the prevalence of sexting and the prevalence of non-consensual image sharing may have increased over the last years.

In the Netherlands, a large representative survey among 20.500 young people (12–25 years old) demonstrated that during the six months prior to the survey, 13% of all boys and 12% of all girls had shared 'nude pictures or sex videos' of themselves with somebody else.<sup>6</sup> In this study, 4% of all boys and 3% of all girls indicated having experienced someone showing their nude picture or sexting video to other people and 2% of all boys and 1% of all girls indicated having experienced someone actually forwarding the images to other people (de Graaf, van den Borne, Nikkelen, Twisk, & Meijer, 2017, p. 174).

In Dutch secondary schools, over two third (69%) of 228 school managers who participated in an online national survey about safety in schools confirmed that non-consensual image sharing happens in their schools. On average, they estimated that incidents of non-consensual image sharing happen in their school almost three times a year (Scholte, Nelen, Wit, & Kroes, 2016, p. 53).

Several scholars have demonstrated how gender plays an important role in (popular and scientific discourses about) young people's sexting practices and non-consensual image sharing. For instance, sexual images are generally considered a 'girl thing' by youth and adults (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Krebbekx, 2018, pp. 63–81; Naezer, 2020), and girls' and young women's images are more easily interpreted as 'sexual' than boys' and young men's images (see also Albury, 2015; Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Naezer, 2020; Ravn, Coffey, & Roberts, 2019; Salter, 2016; Setty, 2019a).

Moreover, while present-day hegemonic cultural representations of ideal femininity encourage girls and women to perform specific types of (hetero)sexiness on the one hand, girls and women are at the same time discouraged from and punished for performing sexiness through moralizing, pathologising and slut-shaming discourses (e.g. Bailey & Hanna, 2011; Burns, 2015; Dobson, 2015, 2019; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; McGovern & Lee, 2018; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Setty, 2019b, 2019c). Also, sexual double standards underpin victim-blaming responses to girls and young women whose images are distributed without their consent, with girls and women being made responsible for (preventing) the abuse of their images (Burkett, 2015; Crofts et al., 2015; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; McGovern & Lee, 2018; Salter, 2016; Setty, 2019b). Meanwhile, boys and young men can gain respect through the possession and (unauthorized) distribution of girls' sexual images, which have become commodities in the 'digital market place' of sexting (Ravn et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2013; Setty, 2019b). The images are considered 'proof' of boys' ability to gain access to girls' bodies, which contributes to their popularity and desirability (Ringrose et al., 2013). In the present study, we analyse how against this background, young perpetrators of non-consensual image sharing make sense of their actions.

## Methodology

In order to learn more about non-consensual image sharing among youth, we conducted in depth interviews with young perpetrators, victims and bystanders. We interviewed 21 Dutch young people aged 15–21, who experienced non-consensual image sharing (Naezer & Van Oosterhout, 2019). Because of our focus on perpetrators' motives, most of our interviews (15) were with perpetrators: those who shared other people's sexual images without their consent. Moreover, we interviewed 2 victims, whose images were shared without their consent, and 4 bystanders, who had received other

people's sexual images via someone else than the original maker, and had *not* distributed those images any further. This provided us with different perspectives on non-consensual image sharing, which was helpful in gaining a more in depth understanding of this type of abuse. Interviews lasted 52 minutes on average and took place between September and November 2018.

In this period, the topic received extensive media attention in the Netherlands. One year earlier, a 14-year-old Dutch boy had committed suicide after three other teenagers had non-consensually spread his nude picture. The suicide and the following court case were extensively covered in different media in 2018 and 2019, resulting in heated debates in online and offline media. The call by the Dutch police in September 2018 for youth to 'stop sexting' also evoked numerous responses, both positive and negative. This context of extensive media attention and an increasingly polarized public debate about (non-consensual) sexting may have resulted in research participants being more outspoken about their opinions and/or feeling the need to take in a position.

We recruited research participants through our professional and personal networks as well as through snowball sampling. We aimed to include a diverse group of young people, in order to explore a diversity of perspectives, opinions and experiences. Our diverse networks, which include judicial and health care professionals, professionals working in schools and youth centres, and young people with different backgrounds, enabled us to recruit young people with different background characteristics and different experiences. In terms of gender, 40% of all 15 perpetrators were boys and 60% were girls. Of 4 bystanders, 2 were girls and 2 were boys. Both victims that participated were girls. None of our participants identified as non-binary or transgender.

In terms of age, we distinguished age at the time of the incident, when the image was received and/or shared without consent, and the age during the interview. The incidents that we discussed with research participants took place no longer than three years ago, with the exception of one participant whose experience dated back five years. For most participants (62%), the incident happened less than one year ago. Because their experiences were still rather recent, research participants remembered them quite lively and were able to reflect on the feelings and emotions that had played a role. During the incidents, interviewees were all between 14 and 18 years old, with most (86%) being 14–16 years old. At the time of the interview, respondents were 15–21 years old, with most (72%) being 15–17 years old.

With regard to educational level, 63% of all research participants were in secondary school (24% in vocational training called *vmbo*; 10% in college training called *havo*; 29% in pre-university training called *vwo*), 14% were in senior secondary vocational training (*MBO*) and 24% were in higher education (19% in universities of applied science; 5% in research universities).

Research participants were less diverse in terms of geographical and ethnic diversity, with more than half (57%) living in the Southern province Noord-Brabant, and 81% being white. Moreover, no young people with mental disabilities or young people living in residential youth care participated in our study.

Several research participants had multiple experiences with non-consensual image sharing. In general, we discussed only one incident per participant, namely the one that had made the deepest impression, and/or the incident in which the research participant had been involved in the most direct way. In one case, we discussed two incidents, so in sum, 22 incidents were included in our study.

In the interviews, we asked participants about the incidents: what had happened, what choices they had made and why, the consequences of these choices, the role of other people, and how they felt about the incident then and at the time of the interview. We coded the interviews using both inductive and deductive coding (Fox, 2008, pp. 430–431): some themes and codes were derived from the available literature (e.g. gender, victim-blaming, slut-shaming), while we used inductive coding to critically assess those codes, and to develop additional codes and themes (e.g. the different motives for non-consensual image sharing). All interviewees have been anonymized and minor details have been changed in order to protect participants' privacy.

## Scenarios and motives

Present day popular and scientific discourse about non-consensual image sharing is dominated by a stereotypical sexting script of ‘when-girl-sends-nude-picture-to-boy’ (Krebbekx, 2018, p. 63–81). In this script, produced for instance through media and scientific reports, a girl sends a sexual (nude) picture to her boyfriend, the relationship ends, and the boy shares the picture with others out of revenge. The dominance of this scripts makes other scenarios invisible (see also Krebbekx, 2018; McGlynn et al., 2017; K. Walker & Sleath, 2017).

Our data demonstrate that this does not do justice to young people’s diverse experiences. In fact, hardly any of the cases we discussed with research participants fitted the stereotypical script. Incidents differed widely in terms of context and motives for sharing, the kind of images that were shared, how and with how many people the images were shared, and the consequences for the victim.

With regard to context, the protagonists were sometimes ex-lovers, but they were also friends, acquaintances and people who were unknown to the maker of the image. Furthermore, perpetrators were not just boys, but also girls. In our study, 9 out of 15 perpetrators were girls (for similar findings among young adults in the UK, see K. Walker, Sleath, Hatcher, Hine, & Crookes, 2019). Even though our study is not a representative, quantitative study, we consider this to be an important signal that deserves more attention in present day discourse about sexting-abuse. Victims on the other hand were mostly girls in our study: in 18 out of 22 incidents, the victim was a girl (82%). International statistics about this type of victimhood are limited and not completely univocal (McGovern & Lee, 2018; K. Walker & Sleath, 2017). In the Netherlands it was found that practically equal percentages of boys and girls (12–25 years old) fall victim to non-consensual image sharing (de Graaf et al., 2017, p. 174), which is remarkable given the fact that offline sexual violence is reported much more often by girls (de Graaf et al., 2017, p. 138).

Next to context, also the motives for non-consensual image sharing differed widely among research participants, with ‘revenge’ being only one of at least six different motives that we distinguish based on our data. Revenge may play a role not only in the classic case of a fight between two (ex-)lovers, but also in fights between (former) friends (see also Krebbekx, 2018, pp. 63–81): ‘Before the holidays, her image was exposed, and after the holidays, [...] we got into a fight and that’s when I decided to forward her image as well’ (girl, 17, perpetrator).

Another scenario where revenge may play a role is when a person receives unwanted sexual images (‘digital flashing’). In our study, this happened to two girls who were harassed by boys who sent them unsolicited and unwanted nude images. One of the girls decided to forward the boys’ images: ‘I thought: let’s show other people the things he sends to me. [...] To make a fool out of him. I was so fed up with it. [...] He deserved it’ (girl, 18, perpetrator). In this case, the perpetrator was also a victim: she received the images against her will. For her, forwarding the images was a way of taking revenge (for an analysis of similar dynamics among adult women, see Waling & Pym, 2019).

A second potential motive for non-consensually sharing sexual images is related to the ‘tension’ that sexual images may evoke in youth. For many research participants, nudity and sexuality were new and somewhat scary. Research participants who received sexual images were often impressed, especially if they lacked sexual experience or if the image had been sent to them without their consent. Some research participants indicated feeling ‘shocked’, and described the images as ‘weird’, ‘dirty’ and/or ‘funny’. Sometimes, they wanted to share this tension that was evoked by the images: ‘You’re in shock and you want to show it to others: Look what I got!’ (girl, 17, perpetrator). In cases like these, it is often not really important who is in the image, and the aim is not to hurt that person; rather, it is about ‘unloading’ the tension that is caused by the confrontation with nudity and sexuality.

A third motive for non-consensual image sharing is to reinforce friendships:

It’s [...] a friend thing I guess, to share stuff. If you receive something, you share it with your friends. [...] Not because we want to play the cool guy, but because we feel like those friends deserve it. [...] Sharing is caring (boy, 16, perpetrator).

As this quote demonstrates, sharing other peoples' sexual images with friends may be considered as an act of 'care' towards friends, which can contribute to the reinforcement of that particular friendship. Even more so, *not* sharing other people's sexual images with friends was interpreted by some respondents as a way of excluding those friends, which may jeopardize the friendship. Because of this, some young people may feel socially 'obliged' to share other people's sexual images with their friends. In scenarios where this motive plays a role, images are typically shared with a small number of friends, not with the aim of hurting or shaming the person on the image, but with the aim of strengthening friendship bonds. It may result in more large-scale spreading of an image however, if the friend decides to forward the image as well.

Yet another motive is related to discussing and learning about sexuality. Our data demonstrated that other people's sexual images sometimes functioned as 'conversation starters' for conversations about sexuality. One possible scenario where this motive can play a role is that of two or more young people who are talking about romantic and sexual relationships and want to discuss their own experiences. For instance, one research participant forwarded a sexual picture and a video of his ex-lover to a friend, to be able to discuss the topic of sexting with his friend and to hear about this friends' opinions and experiences.

A fifth motive directly concerns the regulation of other people's sexual behaviour, especially that of girls: 'She had to learn a lesson, that she should not send such pictures', explained a girl (16, perpetrator) when we asked her why she forwarded a friend's sexual images. Several perpetrators, especially girls, explained how they wanted to 'teach' girls not to participate in sexting by non-consensually sharing those girls' sexual images. Scenarios where this motive plays a key role are typically those where the images are spread on a large scale, sometimes even through special accounts on media such as Instagram. Typical victims are girls, who are stigmatized as 'sluts' for making and sharing sexual images, and who then have to endure name-calling, ridicule and bullying by peers.

A final motive for non-consensually sharing other people's sexual images is to gain popularity. A research participant who was bullied herself explains for instance why she forwarded another girl's sexual images to a boy: 'That boy was rather popular. I think that to some extent, I did it to make him like me, so that I would belong. [...] Sort of like: please, like me!' (girl, 19, perpetrator). As becomes clear in this quote, sexual images, especially those of girls, have certain 'economic value' or 'currency' (see also Ravn et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2013; Setty, 2019b), and by non-consensually sharing the material, some young people hope to gain social status.

This diversity in young people's motives demonstrates that young people who distribute other people's images do not necessarily act from malevolent intentions, as also became clear from a quantitative study among Australian youth (Clancy, Klettke, & Hallford, 2019), where almost 4 out of 5 participants who had disseminated other people's images indicated that they 'didn't think it was a big deal', or felt that it was just a 'joke', or 'funny' to disseminate the images (for similar findings among young adults in the UK, see K. Walker et al., 2019). This is not to say that the consequences may not be disturbing, but the general lack of bad intentions is an important nuance that helps to address the issue in a more balanced way.

Scenarios differ not only in terms of their context and motives, but also in terms of the kind of images that are shared, how and with how many people the images are shared, and the consequences for the victim. With regard to the type of material, images may be pictures or videos. Several research participants regarded videos as more 'intense' than pictures, which is probably related to our finding that videos are often more sexually 'explicit'. The intensity of the images may influence young people's choice to either share it or not. This can work out in different ways, however. On the one hand, respondents indicated that they were less inclined to forward more explicit images such as masturbation/sex videos, because they considered this to be more private. On the other hand, we also noted that such explicit images caused more upheaval, which may make these materials more 'interesting' to share.

Research participants also distinguished between materials that were originally shared within a long-term relationship and materials that were shared outside of such a relationship. They often

felt that it is more 'acceptable' to non-consensually share the latter: 'Because in those cases, the person made the image just to get attention, so attention is what they get' (girl, 18, perpetrator) (see also Hasinoff & Shepherd, 2014).

Scenarios also differ in how and with how many people the images have been shared. Sharing may happen for instance by physically showing the images on a smartphone or desktop, by forwarding the images through media such as WhatsApp, or by uploading them on media such as Instagram. In the first case, the other person can look at the picture, but not share it any further. Some respondents found this more acceptable than other types of non-consensual sharing (see also Hasinoff & Shepherd, 2014). Oftentimes, young people feel like 'everybody' has seen the image. In practice, the audience may be more limited, and consist for example of a small group of friends, or all students from a certain grade in one school.

Finally, scenarios can be different in terms of consequences, for instance with regard to the amount of upheaval that is caused by the incident. Sometimes, there is hardly any upheaval:

It was just this one conversation [where I forwarded a picture of a girl to a friend], and that was it. [...] It's not necessarily always a big drama like you hear in the news. The girl did not suffer any consequences (boy, 19, perpetrator).

Moreover, responses to the images are not necessarily negative: 'She [the girl on the picture] had a beautiful body. [...] The only consequence was that boys wanted her more' (girl, 19, perpetrator). In other cases, there is more upheaval, and victims may be bullied and harassed: 'People called her a slut. [...] Boys started sending her messages on Snapchat, because they thought she was 'easy'' (girl, 16, perpetrator). Especially girls were often bullied, slut-shamed, judged, joked about, and sexually harassed (see also McGlynn et al., 2017), as will be explored more in-depth later. In most of the cases, the upheaval lasted a few weeks or months, but sometimes, the bullying continued for years.

### Gendered sexual norms and taboos

While scenarios of and motives for non-consensual image sharing differ, what stood out in our study is that in all cases, gendered sexual norms and taboos played an important role. One of these is the general taboo against nudity and sexuality. This taboo, together with the 'newness' of nudity and sexuality for young people, contributes to sexual images becoming interesting, exciting, and/or shocking, which makes young people more eager to (non-consensually) share them.

Sexting is possibly even more taboo than offline sexual practices. It is often constructed in contemporary discourse as something bad, dirty, stupid and/or dangerous (Döring, 2014; McGovern & Lee, 2018; Naezer, 2018b; Renold et al., 2015); an idea that was reflected in participants' opinions and their condemnation of peers who participate in sexting (see also Gatti, 2009; Setty, 2019b). Especially girl sexters were judged harshly:

Some girls have lots of self-respect, and those are the good girls. They don't do such things as sexting. But the weak, insecure girls who are craving for attention, they are less easily convinced that things can go wrong (boy, 16, perpetrator).

According to this and other research participants, especially those without sexting experience, sexting is a shameful activity that is only undertaken by weak, insecure, desperate and/or stupid people (girls). Many research participants had such negative opinions about sexting, that they were not able to imagine why peers would make and share sexual images in the first place, especially outside of formal (romantic) relationships (see also Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). This lack of understanding, which is embedded in present-day negative discourse about sexting, facilitates non-consensual image sharing: it makes it easier to share other people's images without their consent and to blame the victim for it (Setty, 2019c).

This victim-blaming was widely present among research participants: 'In the end, it's the person who made the picture who is responsible' (boy, 15, bystander). Not only research participants, but



also parents and other adults blamed and punished victims for making and sharing sexual images. Some adults even participated in making fun of the victim: 'My mother was laughing so hard. She told me to send her the picture [of the victim] as well. She said: from now on, if you feel insecure, you just look at this picture and you'll feel better' (girl, 15, perpetrator). Another perpetrator recalls how a teacher/team supervisor at her school responded to her distributing another girl's sexual image:

He [the teacher] said to that girl [the victim]: 'You shouldn't have made those nude pictures, that's just stupid. You can expect this [non-consensual sharing] to happen.' And then he sent me home, without punishment. I was so surprised about that! [...] I expected detention, or that my parents were called. But nothing like that happened. He just said: you can go home, have a nice weekend. [...] Everybody was like: really? (girl, 16, perpetrator).

This girl and her peers expected her to be punished, which they considered a logical consequence of her actions, but she was sent home, with her school sending out a strong message that non-consensual sharing of images is something that 'just happens' and that victims are the ones to blame.

As has been argued in previous research, these norms and taboos regarding sex and sexting are highly gendered, and sexual double standards played an important role in research participants' experiences. Double standards came up first of all in the evaluation of girls' images, which were more readily regarded as 'sexual' than boys' images (see also Albury, 2015; Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Naezer, 2020; Ravn et al., 2019; Salter, 2016; Setty, 2019a). One research participant explains about an image of a girl lying on a bed with a naked upper body: 'Had this been a man, who had made such a picture in a similar pose, many people would not call it a nude picture' (boy, 17, bystander). Such gendered evaluations of 'sexual' images makes girls more vulnerable for becoming a victim of non-consensual image sharing, as her pictures are judged as more sexual, and therefore more 'interesting' to share (see also Setty, 2019c).

Secondly, research participants condemned girls easier than boys for making and sharing sexual images of themselves, and girls were often confronted with slut-shaming and stigmatization (see also Burns, 2015; Dobson, 2015, 2019; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Ricciardelli & Adorjan, 2019; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013; Setty, 2019b, 2019c; S. Walker, Sanci, & Temple-Smith, 2013). For boys, there is no similar condemnation. A boy who makes and shares sexual images (with a girl) is regarded as 'cool', or in the worst scenario as a 'pervert' (girl, 18, perpetrator) (see also Albury, 2015; Naezer, 2020; Ravn et al., 2019; Salter, 2016; Setty, 2019a). Because of this, girls' images cause more upheaval than those of boys. This adds an intensity to girls' images that makes girls extra vulnerable not only to non-consensual image sharing, but also to victim-blaming and slut-shaming.

For boys, gendered sexual norms encourage them to obtain and share girls' sexual images in the heteronormative 'digital market place' of sexting (Ravn et al., 2019; Ringrose et al., 2013; Setty, 2019b, 2019c): 'Boys are applauded and admired [for receiving and sharing images]' (boy, 17, perpetrator). Even if boy perpetrators' behaviour is evaluated as 'wrong', they are still excused: 'I don't think you can prevent this [non-consensual image sharing] from happening, because it's in boys' nature: showing off, forwarding those pictures, acting cool' (boy, 16, perpetrator). Both boys and girls in our study believed it to be part of boys' 'nature' to enjoy watching (semi-)naked girls and women, and interpreted this as an excuse, or at least a mitigating factor, for non-consensual image sharing: 'boys will be boys'. This is consistent with a longer tradition of boys' and men's (hetero)sexuality being regarded as more natural, acceptable and uncontrollable than that of girls and women; a myth that legitimizes sexual violence committed by boys and men (Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017).

This is not to say that only boys can benefit from non-consensually sharing other people's images. To the contrary: girl perpetrators who participated in our study also felt like they benefitted from sharing the images in terms of the motives described earlier. With regard to the latter motive however, that of gaining popularity, boy perpetrators profit from gendered norms that encourage heterosexual prowess and legitimize sexual violence against girls. For girl perpetrators, gaining

popularity through non-consensually sharing peers' image was related more to the perceived shameful status of the image itself, although non-consensual image sharing also enabled them to communicate their own adherence to norms regarding femininity: 'I am not a slut like her' (see also Naezer, 2020), an option that fits a longer history of girls and women being conditioned to compete against each other (McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008).

## Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that there is not one prototypical scenario for non-consensual image sharing: scenarios are different in terms of context and motives, types of images, scale of distribution and consequences. Protagonists may have different relations with each other and different motives may play a role. The images that are shared may be more or less 'explicit', they may be distributed on a wider or a more limited scale and the consequences may be more or less severe.

In all cases, research participants' reports reveal how perpetrators, both boys and girls, feel supported or even encouraged by contemporary gendered sexual norms and taboos. Taboos that play a role are the general taboo against nudity and sexuality, and especially the taboo against sexting. Because of this taboo, many research participants (as well as adults such as parents and teachers) judged peers for participating in sexting, which made it easier to share images without the maker's consent and to blame the victim. For some youth, the taboo against sexting was even the main reason for non-consensually sharing another person's image: they felt like they had to 'teach' peers not to participate in sexting, and did that by non-consensually sharing those peers' images. This means that current negative attitudes towards sexting not only facilitate, but even encourage non-consensual image sharing.

Our study confirms previous studies in pointing out that norms and taboos regarding sexting and non-consensual image sharing are highly gendered, and adds to this body of literature by empirically demonstrating how these gendered norms and taboos play a role in the experiences of young people who have been involved in non-consensual image sharing. Research participants regarded sexting as a 'girl thing', and evaluated girls' images as 'sexual' more readily than those of boys. Moreover, they judged and shamed girls more than boys for making such images. It became clear that this produces especially girls' images as interesting, worthy of sharing and wrong, which facilitates non-consensual image-sharing, slut-shaming and victim-blaming.

In addition, gendered sexual norms provide a context where boys can perform hegemonic masculinity through (non-consensual) image sharing, which has come to be regarded as a marker of heterosexual prowess. For girl perpetrators, gendered sexual norms provide a context where they can perform normative chaste femininity by non-consensually sharing other girls' images and claiming not to be as 'slutty' as the victim. For boy perpetrators, even if their behaviour was judged by peers as morally wrong, it was often excused by the age-old adage that 'boys will be boys', which further protects boys who non-consensually distribute girls' sexual images.

Our analysis thus demonstrates that non-consensual image sharing is a layered, heterogenous problem that is deeply embedded in present-day social norms regarding gender and sexuality. For practical interventions aimed at the prevention of this type of sexual violence, it is crucial to take these complexities into account. With our analysis, we hope to inspire a sex(ing)-positive approach that involves a nuanced understanding of sexting and non-consensual image sharing, that is attentive to the different scenarios of and motives for non-consensual image sharing, and that is characterized by critical attention for the role of present-day gendered sexual norms and taboos in facilitating non-consensual image sharing.

While our study provides insights into one specific type of image-based abuse, future research may analyse whether similar or different dynamics play a role in other types of image-based abuse, such as the non-consensual creation of sexual images, sextortion, or unsolicited image sharing. Also, our study indicates that different types of image-based abuse may be interconnected: in some cases, participants non-consensually shared other people's sexual images because they had received those

images against their will, making them both victims and perpetrators. Future research may provide more insight into such interconnections.

Second, our analysis is based on interviews, mainly with perpetrators. Future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding by including additional perspectives, such as the perspectives of parents, teachers, health professionals and police officers, and by using participant observation as a method, so that cases can be studied as they unfold, rather than in retrospect.

Finally, in our study we did not systematically analyse how specific intersections of social categorizations such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, educational level or age impact experiences of image-based abuse. Future qualitative and quantitative studies may explore this issue more in-depth.

## Notes

1. <https://www.vraaghetdepolitie.nl/dwang-en-seks/naaktfotos-en-filmpjes/wat-kan-ik-doen-als-mijn-naaktfoto-verspreid-is.html>.
2. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/seksuele-misdrijven/wraakporno>.
3. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/05/12/grapperhaus-moderniseert-wetgeving-seksueel-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag>.
4. <https://www.adformatie.nl/campagnes/ggd-adviseert-jongeren-bescherm-jezelf-tegen-sextortion>.
5. Both in major media outlets (e.g. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2248894-politie-scherpt-advies-aan-jongeren-aan-stop-met-sexting.html>) and in an educational programme in schools (<https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/fictieve-sextingzaak-als-voorlichting-ik-wil-geen-echte-naaktvideo-vinden-hoor~bfed4ae5/>).
6. Even though 1,7% of participants assigned male at birth and 2,9% of participants assigned female at birth indicated that they do not (completely) identify with the sex/gender they were assigned at birth (de Graaf et al., 2017, pp. 52–53), the analyses in this study were conducted in a binary way, comparing 'boys' and 'girls' based on sex/gender assigned at birth.

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