Friends, lovers, risk and intimacy

Risk-taking as a socially meaningful practice

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand the notion of risk in photo-sharing practices and the purpose of risk in the development of intimate relationships. We argue that risk in the form of self-disclosure is a key aspect of intimate photo sharing rather than an undesirable side effect, and that a broader analytical perspective on the role of risk in the development of intimate relationships allows us to understand risky photo sharing as a socially meaningful practice. We unfold and elaborate the link between risk and intimacy on the basis of five focus group interviews with 21 German high school students aged 14 to 17. The interviews focus on the participants' sharing practices and the associated role played by risk. The data indicate that risk does serve a social purpose as a way of 'proving friendship'. However, the data also suggest that the young people in the study are more willing to accept risk related to 'friendly intimacy' as compared to 'romantic intimacy'. We discuss the potential reasons for this difference as well as its wider methodological and theoretical implications.

Keywords
Sexting; intimacy; risk; self-disclosure

Introduction

'Risk' is central to the study of children's and young people's online behaviour and has been widely discussed in relation to online harm, rights of expression, the connection between online and offline behaviour and digital literacy (Livingstone & Mason, 2015). It is generally considered a negative aspect of youth life: as something that must be avoided. Indeed, whether it be literature on children, youth and online media, children's psychology or criminology, notions of 'risk taking', 'risk tolerance', 'youth at risk' and 'risky behaviour' treat risk as an unwelcome element in the lives of children and young people that should somehow be prevented and minimised (France, 2008; Turnbull & Spence, 2011). Moreover, risk is an important concept in Giddens' (1990) theory on late modernity and Beck's (1992) notion of the risk society. In these works, risk is related to the precarious conditions of modern life and the uncertainty of decisions that individuals will have to make in an ever-changing social context. This has created a widespread preoccupation with risk in policies and regulation regarding children and young people (France, 2008; Turnbull & Spence, 2011), turning risk prevention into a key perspective on children and youth.

However, risk may at the same time (and for the same reason) develop into a purpose in its own right (Lyng, 1990) and risky behaviour may become a distinct way of dealing with the conditions of late modernity among young people (Morrissey, 2008). As Sonia Livingstone (2008) argues: "What for an adult observer may seem risky, is for a teenager often precisely the opportunity that they seek" (p. 397). In her article, Livingstone focuses on the way a sample of young people handle their online self-representation and their reflections on the risks and opportunities that need to be balanced as part of this endeavour. Extending Giddens' (1991) framework, Livingstone interprets this as a matter of self-actualisation, which, due to its social nature, involves a balance between opportunity and risk. In a similar manner, we would like to focus on risk as a basic condition of intimate relationships across online and offline contexts. We will focus on self-disclosure as a specific form of risk taking that serves concrete social purposes in the development of intimate and romantic relationships. In the field of personal and social psychology, risk taking in the form of self-disclosure is regarded as an important aspect of the formation of intimate relationships, with clear empirical associations between self-disclosure and the development of intimate social relationships identified (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). According to this perspective, self-disclosure plays a key role in the maintenance of intimate relationships, as it is this willingness to 'put oneself at risk' that makes intimacy possible in the first place. Furthermore, this is true for intimate relationships in general, not just those that are negotiated on social media platforms. Thus, the idea that intimate photo sharing should be avoided due to its riskiness misses the point: that it is precisely the riskiness that makes it meaningful as a way of forming and maintaining intimate relationships in the same manner as non-mediated practices of intimacy.

Accordingly, we will describe and discuss the intimate photo-sharing practices of a sample of young people, documented through a series of focus group interviews with

the aim of understanding risk as a productive and socially meaningful phenomenon. This will include a categorisation and description of the photo-sharing practices in question, a description of the sorts of risks the practices seem to involve and a description of the way the young people in question reflect on and deal with these risks. In the following section we will describe in more detail the way personal and social psychology understand self-disclosure as a way of forming intimate relationships and how this can be conceptualised as a specific form of risk taking. We will also introduce the notion of 'media practice', with (intimate) photo sharing representing a specific type. In our analysis we will describe the intimate photo-sharing practices reported by the focus groups participants as well as their reflections on the sorts of risk they involve. The young people in the study are found to deem risk a 'productive' way of proving friendship, yet they are much less willing to accept the risk related to nudes and sexual intimacy. In our discussion, we will reflect on the possible reasons for this distinction in relation to life phase, peer culture and the more general theme of sexuality in adolescence.

The role of self-disclosure in the development of intimate relationships

Self-disclosure is "the process of making the self known to others" (Jourard & Lasakow, 1954, p. 91, cited in Joinson & Paine, 2007). According to Joinson and Paine, this can serve a range of purposes, of which the development of romantic and intimate relationships has received considerable attention in the field of personal and social psychology. This research has its origins in the 1970s and 1980s and focuses on intimacy as a quality of the interactions between partners (Rubin, 1975; Rubin, Hill, Peplau & Dunkelschetter, 1980), whereas later studies define intimacy as an interpersonal process in which self-disclosure plays a key role along with partner disclosure and partner responsiveness (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Laurenceau et al., 1998). Furthermore, Park et al. (2011) have examined the relationship between self-disclosure and intimacy on social media.

The conceptualisation of intimacy as an interpersonal process was introduced by Reis and Shaver (1988). These authors integrate work on intimacy from a variety of disciplines to create a combined model focusing on "the emotional and communicative processes involved in comparing identities, establishing sexual mutuality, becoming committed and so forth" (p. 370). Self-disclosure is regarded as an integrated aspect of this process, as the "disclosure of inner feelings and experiences to another person fosters liking, caring, and trust" (Reis & Shaver, p. 372). Accordingly, they define intimacy as a process in which person A discloses self-relevant feelings and information to person B, who responds in ways that may or may not make person A feel understood, validated or cared for. The authors emphasise the "motives, fears and goals" of person A, "including the fear of exposure, fear of abandonment, fear of angry attacks" (p. 376), thereby acknowledging that the interpersonal process of intimacy may not necessarily lead to the desired outcome. This risk seems to be a necessary aspect of the process, because trust is specifically built

by making the discloser increasingly vulnerable (emotionally or otherwise) to the other person (Rubin, 1975, cited in Joinson & Paine, 2007). Accordingly, to attain a desired level of intimacy with another person, the individual must put him- or herself somewhat at risk.

When we align the notion of self-disclosure with the concept of risk in the coming sections, we do so with direct reference to this link between self-disclosure and potentially undesired outcomes. As evident from the literature cited here, the majority of relevant research was published at a time when the Internet and social media platforms were yet to become an integrated part of everyday social interactions. Thus, the notion of self-disclosure is primarily tied to "verbal communication of personally relevant information, thoughts and feelings to another" (Laurenceau et al., 1998, p. 1239). Nevertheless, Reis and Shaver (1988) highlight that the exchange taking place might not necessarily be verbal. Indeed, intimacy is a theme in many current studies on personal and visual communication on social media platforms (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016), not least in works focusing on the phatic nature of communication on social media (Lomborg, 2011; Sørensen, 2012) or on the use of visual communication to establish and maintain an intimate space (Van House, 2009, 2011). One likely reason why the literature on self-disclosure and intimacy is not referenced more often is that it belongs to a quite different research paradigm from the primarily qualitative and media-ethnographic approaches that dominate contemporary research into young people's everyday lives with digital media. However, the potential link between self-disclosure and intimacy provides a fruitful perspective on the possible purposes of intimate photo sharing. Accordingly, in this article we integrate the notion of self-disclosure into a media-practice framework, which will be introduced next.

Sexting as a 'practice of intimacy'

Practices can be defined as those "bodily and mental routines" (Postill, cited in Bräuchler & Postill, 2010, p. 11) that organise human action and interaction in everyday life. Nick Couldry (2004) has stated that media studies should treat media as an open set of practices relating to or oriented around media (cited in Bräuchler & Postill, 2010). According to Couldry, "we should start not with media texts or institutions, but with practice…in all its looseness and openness" (Couldry, 2004, cited in Bräuchler & Postill, 2010, p. 39). In the context of this article, this means that we should interpret intimate media practices as an extension of the more general and unmediated intimacy practices that represent a part of everyday life. The notion of intimacy practices was introduced by Paul Morgan (2002) as an aspect of his general work on family practices. Here, intimacy practices can be defined as practices that enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and of being attuned and special to one another (Jamieson, 2011). Thus, intimacy practices do not solely involve romantic or sexual relationships; they also include close social relationships in the broadest sense.

In this light, intimacy practices are by no means alien to media studies. Indeed, considerable research into the proliferation of mobile communication in everyday life has focused on the mobile intimacy (Hjorth & Lim, 2012) that emerges when digital communication enters public space as well as how mobile and visual communication are used to establish intimate social spaces in a variety of ways (Habuchi, 2005; Villi, 2007; Van House, 2009, 2011). Sexting and the sharing of intimate photos can be identified as one such practice, this now being a common way to establish and maintain romantic and sexual intimacy among teenagers. The practice involves the sharing of 'nudes' – photos of naked or half-naked bodies – among couples or peers for a range of purposes. A minority of studies have explored the relative 'mundanity' of this practice as a way of 'practising' romance and exploring sexuality (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Davidson, 2015), while the majority of the available research in the field has focused on its risky nature within a relatively traditional perspective, such as its association with general risky behaviour (Van Ouytsel et al., 2015, 2017) or cyberbullying and victimisation (Van Ouytsel, Walrave, & Van Gool, 2014). There are good reasons for this, because sexting involves a great deal of actual risk tied to the consequences of unauthorised sharing. Moreover, this risk is overwhelmingly gender-specific, as the consequences of unauthorised sharing are considerably more harmful to young women than to young men (Ringrose, Harvey, Gill, & Livingstone, 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

Nevertheless, none of these studies deal with the 'productive' role of risk in the development of intimate relationships. Risk is addressed as an undesired consequence of sexting, rather than as a purpose in itself. However, as noted in the introduction, risk may indeed represent a purpose in its own right and a means to an end. In some cases, sexting may take the form of 'edgework' or voluntary risk taking (Hart, 2017), where the risk itself becomes the purpose of the activity. In other cases, posting "risky selfies" on Tumblr may form part of "knowing, experiencing, understanding and experiencing bodies" (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015, p. 94) within a more general emancipatory project. In a similar manner, we explore here risk and risk taking in a mundane, everyday perspective, as a socially meaningful phenomenon serving the social purpose of establishing and maintaining intimate relationships. Of course, this social function of risk and risk taking in everyday contexts is contingent on the perceptions of the actors involved. As Graham, Jordan, Hutchinson & de Wet (2018) recognise, risks are socially and culturally embedded and "the goal is for this reason to discover how young people define risk and what factors shape their perception of risks" (p. 325). Young people who share intimate photos may view this practice as perfectly safe and risk may not represent an important consideration to them. However, as will be demonstrated below, the young people in our study are quite aware of the risks related to intimate photo sharing, with these playing a key role in their (re)production of intimacy and intimate relationships.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to further develop our understanding of the role of risk related to sexting and how intimate photo-sharing practices are implicated in

the development of intimate relationships. We do so on the basis of a focus group study involving 21 students aged 14 to 17 from a high school located in a small town in central Germany. The interviews enquire into these young people's sharing of photos as well as their reflections on intimate photo sharing in general and risk in particular. We will analyse these sharing practices as intimacy practices involving varying degrees of purposeful 'self-disclosure' and explore in more detail how the young people in our study talk about such self-disclosure. To date, very little research has been conducted on the practice of sexting in Germany. Indeed, most of the existing data on the prevalence of sexting come from the United States and are "quite divergent (2.5%–21%), as the surveys are based on different age groups, different types of samples, different data collection methods, and different single-item sexting measures" (Döring, 2014, p. 3). Nonetheless, these statistics show that the sending of nude pictures is not a mass phenomenon, with only a minority of young people partaking in the practice. Due to the lack of existing research, this study can facilitate understanding of the practice in a national context. Before describing the participants' reflections on intimate photo sharing in greater detail, we will present the methodology.

Method and data

The data described and analysed in this article were collected by Mareike Bonitz as part of a research project on photo-sharing practices among young people on Snapchat. The empirical context is a German secondary school in a town with about 10,000 inhabitants, a so-called *Realschule* containing students aged 16 to 17. Bonitz applied a mixed-methods approach with an emphasis on the qualitative part. The main reason for this choice of research design is that surveys are an efficient tool for strategic sampling and recruitment. Thus, an initial survey was conducted in order to identify general patterns of use among the school's students and to recruit participants for the focus group interviews on this basis. Five segmented samples were created, including only females, only males and a mixed group. Moreover, the focus groups included students from the ninth (age 14–15) and tenth grades (age 16–17). Altogether, five focus group interviews with four to five students were conducted, involving 21 students in total.

    As a method, focus groups emphasise a specific theme and enable participants to discuss this issue as a group (Bryman, 2012). The focus of interest is on how people respond to each other's views and express opinions on the basis of the interaction that takes place within the group. This group interaction is especially fruitful when bringing new phenomena to light, due to certain advantages that focus group interviews hold over individual interviews. In particular, they include a range of "communicative processes - such as storytelling, joking, arguing, boasting, teasing, persuasion, challenge, and disagreement" (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 180), allowing the researcher to observe 'meaning in action'. In this study, the focus groups enabled the young people to probe each other's reasons for hold-

ing a particular perspective towards intimate photo sharing and helped elicit a variety of views in relation to this issue (Bryman, 2012). Given that focus group participants are encouraged to argue and challenge their views, they can "collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meaning around it" and the "process of coming to terms with (that is, understanding) social phenomena is not undertaken by individuals in isolation from each other" (Bryman 2012 p. 504). Therefore, focus groups can be regarded as an experiment to draw out aspects that would otherwise remain unseen by, for example, ethnographic studies (Demant, 2012). Although focus groups may be deemed fairly unnatural and artificial settings that produce rather limited data (Despret, 2004), they articulate versions of interactions that might not emerge in other situations and bridge the gap between interview and observational data (Halkier, 2010).

Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and took place in a conference room at the school during school hours. In this way, the students could be interviewed in their usual surroundings, enabling them to feel more confident and at ease (Green & Hart, 1998). The schedule consisted of a variety of questions concerning self-disclosure, self-representation, risk and privacy concerns on Snapchat. In order to encourage interaction and to act as a stepping stone so that the participants could define themselves in relation to each other, the interviews also included a sorting task, whereby the students were asked to categorise several images depicting different forms of self-disclosure. As the practice of photo sharing on Snapchat is a rather sensitive topic, the schedule introduced scenarios and comments that helped the participants to make their stances clear without feeling exposed. With the help of these statements, concepts of self-representation and self-disclosure could be translated into recognisable everyday situations. To ensure comparability between the groups, all participants were presented with the same main questions, although not necessarily in the same order.

The interview data were subsequently transcribed and anonymised and then coded and analysed in accordance with Miles and Huberman's (1994) guidelines and principles from conversation analysis (Grønkjær, Curtis, de Crespigny, & Delmar, 2011). The coding strategy was abductive (Jensen, 2002) in the sense that we aimed to extend and elaborate our theoretical framework on the basis of new themes and concepts emerging from the data. Given that this is a qualitative study, we cannot generalise our findings to a wider population. Nevertheless, in alignment with Halkier's (2011) work on analytical generalisation, we aim to generate an extensive account of intimate photo-sharing practices by zooming in on the categories of risk and intimacy and bringing forward different voices and positions. This allows us to explore patterns, negotiations and power struggles that are essential to understanding young people's intimate photo-sharing practices.

Another topic to address is of an ethical nature. Interaction processes in focus groups, especially when they revolve around intimate and potentially divisive subjects such as sexting, can lead to participants' exposure or even suppression (Demant, 2012). To protect the participants, all focus groups were anonymised and formed on the basis of natural

groupings. This implied that friends were grouped together to establish a safe atmosphere and to responsibly handle sensitive issues. In addition, the participants were never asked directly about their own personal experiences with intimate photo sharing. Instead, scenarios and statements were introduced that made it possible to abstract and discuss in the third person in order to avoid participants feeling exposed.

Presentation of focus groups

As indicated in the previous section, the analytical focus of a focus group is the social interaction taking place between participants, alongside how this interaction shapes individual statements and shows the positioning of the topic under discussion. For this reason, we begin the analysis with an introduction to the social dynamics of each focus group as important context to the subsequent analysis.

The first focus group consisted of four female participants from the ninth grade, aged 14 and 15. They appeared to be very good friends, spending a lot of time together. The atmosphere within the group was harmonious and the level of trust was very high. However, the group dynamics were rather one-sided and the participants agreed on topics most of the time. Therefore, the group was named the 'The Consenting Group'.

The second group consisted of one male and three female participants in the tenth grade. They were 15 and 16 years old and also good friends. However, some tension between them was evident, partly rooted in gender issues. They appeared to be more self-confident and outspoken and held more radical views. The female participants in particular held rather judgemental attitudes towards the sharing of nude pictures and were very dismissive of these actions. Thus, this group was named 'The Disapproving Group'.

The third group included five female participants from the tenth grade aged 15 to 16. They were classmates but belonged to different cliques, which meant that they held very different opinions. This made the focus group interview very interactive and led to fruitful arguments. It was also noticeable that the participants were a bit older and able to both reflect on their own opinions and challenge different views on the topic. All of the members were very involved in the conversation and vied to get the chance to speak. This group was named 'The Dissenting Group'.

The fourth group was a male-only group comprising four participants aged 14 and 15 in the ninth grade. They were very good friends but were also eager to be perceived positively by the others and seemed to act in specific ways to gain recognition from their friends, possibly due to their younger age. Consequently, this was the most challenging focus group to lead and it was difficult to uncover actual opinions. Although the direct output of this focus group interview was a little disappointing, it proved insightful in that the participants' attempts to adapt to gendered identities could be analysed rather well (see also Hansen in this issue). Due to these factors, the group was named 'The Conforming Group'.

The fifth and final group consisted of four male participants aged 15 and 16, in the tenth grade. In contrast to the preceding group, they were self-reflective and did not need to portray themselves in a particular way to receive their friends' respect. This may have been due to individual factors, but might also indicate that age is an important factor in the way young people deal with these topics. For this reason, this group was named 'The Accepting Group'. Even though the participants were all on very good terms with each other, there were also some disagreements and intensive group dynamics that engendered interesting perspectives.

Group name	The Consenting Group	The Disapproving Group	The Dissenting Group	The Conforming Group	The Accepting Group
Gender distribution	4 female participants	3 female + 1 male participants	5 female participants	4 male participants	4 male participants
Age	14–15	15–16	15–16	14–15	15–16
Group dynamics	Rather one-sided; high agreement on all topics	Tensions partly due to gender issues; more radical and judgemental views, especially among the female participants	Variety of different opinions; very fruitful and active discussions	Eager to receive recognition from others; difficult to uncover actual opinions as participants adapted to gendered identities	Reflective participants; intense group dynamics with different perspectives

Analysis

Our analysis focuses on the relationship between risk and intimacy in photo-sharing practices among the focus group participants. On this basis, we can identify two key photo-sharing practices involving intimacy and risk: friendly intimacy photo-sharing practices and romantic intimacy photo-sharing practices. The focus group participants distinguished quite sharply between the two and the sort of risk they involve. In the following, we describe these practices and discuss the focus group participants' reflections concerning risk in relation to both practices and in contrast to each other.

Friendly intimacy

While intimate photo sharing often includes a romantic or sexual dimension, our focus group material indicates that intimate photo sharing among friends represents another important theme. Thus, intimate photo sharing is not limited to sexting between lovers; it also includes the practice of sharing unattractive and unflattering pictures to connect

with friends. In our focus groups, this appeared to be a common and popular practice, as all participants claimed to regularly share random, funny, ugly and silly pictures with their friends. By sending snaps that are intended to be "extra not nice" (Mia, The Consenting Group) or "completely stupid" (Tobias, The Accepting Group), the focus group participants disclosed themselves in ways that are not suitable for the wider public. These photos are not just accidental, they are deliberately created to reflect the exact opposite of attraction or beauty. Moreover, they are specifically intended for friends rather than to be uploaded on Facebook, for instance, where individuals choose to present themselves "from a more beautiful side" (Mariosa, The Disapproving Group). In this way, our focus group participants confirmed Kofoed and Larsen's (2016) comparison of Snapchat and Instagram use among Danish college students, in which Snapchat is said to represent an intimate, non-public context of photo sharing.

Beyond platform and audience, trust was another key theme. Mia's group of friends, The Consenting Group, has existed for a long time: "Not just two months, but already four or five years. That is why you can send stuff like that. Uglier pictures" (The Consenting Group). Within this group of friends, they trust each other enough to disclose themselves in these ways, making themselves vulnerable in order to create a deeper sense of closeness (Jamieson, 2011). On the one hand, trust and closeness between friends seems to minimise the fear of exposure or abandonment. On the other hand, photos serve to build this trust. Lina from the Disapproving Group declared that such snaps are "proof of friendship". Thus, by sending such images, the young people in our study signalled the trustworthiness of their friend – the receiver – while at the same time strengthening friendship ties and reducing concerns related to self-representation.

Acceptable risk

This exposure among friends involves risk. One way of establishing intimacy is to become part of the photo-sharing practice and this involves some level of risk taking. This risk is partly related to the fact that pictures can be easily shared and distributed among peers. Our groups mainly discussed the risk of pictures being "screenshotted", a perceived limitation of Snapchat's design. Even though the user receives a notification whenever someone takes a screenshot, the photo can still be saved on another device. In addition, there are other tricks to saving snaps without the user being notified. The topic of screenshotting proved interesting because our focus group participants held very ambivalent and sometimes even hypocritical attitudes towards it. On the one side, the young people in our study acknowledged that sharing photos is a sign of trust, especially if they are intimate: You "do not send these snaps to just anyone and if you do, you really think that he keeps it for himself. You just trust that other person" (Benedikt, The Conforming Group). Most of the focus group participants shared these expectations and believed that keeping these pictures to oneself is part of this contract: "I have never done that, screenshotting something. I don't know, maybe then they do the same with your pictures and then the trust is

just gone" (Jannis, The Disapproving Group). It also represents a sort of deal or agreement that one shares with friends in order to keep a balance between risk and opportunity. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a discrepancy between what the young people in our study expect of each other and how they actually behave. They claimed not to like the act of screenshotting, yet they still do it. Almost all of the focus group participants were aware of ways to screenshot pictures or admitted to having done it at some point. Here, the Accepting Group hints to the fact that not sticking to the contract may be part of the attraction:

Interviewer: And with your friends you can be sure that they don't take a screenshot? (Laughter)

Tobias: More or less!

Max: Well…

Lukas: It depends.

Interviewer: So, you mean, you can't?

Tobias: That depends on the person. And the state of mind the person is in.

Lukas: And on the picture, right?

Tobias: Yes!

Max: The more embarrassing, the more likely the chance that it gets saved.

Interviewer: So, in the end it does get saved?

Tobias: Yes, probably yes.

Henrik: But then you see it, so…

Tobias: Sometimes you think about that, but sometimes you just don't care. Because you can trust that person so much that you know that the person will not send it to other people.

Interviewer: But even with friends you can't be so sure? (Agreement)

In this exchange, the participants broadly recognise that photos may be screenshotted even though this is against 'the deal'. However, this risk is deemed acceptable because "you know that the person will not send it to other people". In this way, the young people in this focus group seem to cope with a level of 'acceptable risk' and consider it part of the practice that makes it exciting and tempting. Ultimately, the fact that the photos can be saved might not be particularly relevant, because they are still in control of what kinds of pictures are sent and even if embarrassing pictures are saved, they know that they can usually trust their friends not to disseminate them beyond their group. In this way, risk is not eliminated, but rather plays a productive role in reproducing these social relationships. The young people in our study thus signalled trust by sending such photos and in the process tested out who is worthy of receiving it.

Romantic intimacy

Given the apparently common practice of sharing ugly and awkward pictures with friends to establish friendly intimacy, it was interesting to lean the stances of the focus group participants on actual sexting. Although Snapchat is sometimes presented as the perfect sexting tool, the practice of sharing intimate photos of a sexual nature was dismissed by almost all of the participants in our study. When confronted with the statement "When I send my boyfriend/ girlfriend a very intimate snap of myself, it is also proof of trust", the female participants in particular voiced very harsh opinions. For example, to Mia from the Consenting Group:

> I think that this is no proof of trust because it does not have anything to do with trust. A relationship at our age normally does not last that long and then when it is over, it is used against you. You just should not do it.

Another girl in her group, Rebekka, agreed, stating that she finds these pictures "unnecessary because I hear every day new things about 'Yeah, there is a picture going around of this girl or this one'". In this way, all of the participants seemed to know of someone who had had bad experiences with sharing intimate photos of a sexual nature. This attitude was also expressed in the other focus groups. For instance, after being asked to comment on the 'nudes' during the sorting task, Lina immediately answered: "We don't say anything to that, I think that's really uncool" (The Disapproving Group). She continued to explain: "You should not show yourself that revealing on the Internet. Also especially not on Snapchat because people can just take screenshots, and then it just goes around everywhere and I really don't think that's cool". She explained how one of her good friends once sent nude photos and still suffers from the aftermath. As described above, The Disapproving Group thus voiced very harsh opinions about the practice. However, although the male participants expressed a similar sense of discomfort given the risk of someone spreading the pictures, they did not take such a judgemental stance. Like the female participants, they referred to situations where such photos had been shared. As Max from The Accepting Group explained:

> There are also the people who convince others: 'Here, please take a screenshot!' And then there is a screenshot and suddenly the whole school knows about it and then... Oh well! That is why you have this premonition and just don't do it.

Most of the participants seemed to have a high level of awareness of these risks and therefore did not dare explore this kind of 'exposure'. Although sexting might be an established practice to maintain romantic and sexual intimacy among contemporary teenagers, the participants in our study seemed to view the potential risks as outweighing the opportunities. Only one participant – Kerstin in The Dissenting Group – admitted to sharing intimate photos involving nudity, sending them to her best friend: "For instance, when we bought new underwear. And I just always want to know her opinion. And I

would not do that, if I didn't trust her". She defended the practice, viewing it positively, although this example is primarily about friendly intimacy.

Unacceptable risk

As evident from the previous section, sexting was harshly judged by the majority of participants in our study. Given the number of stories about friends and acquaintances who have had bad experiences with this practice, it is quite likely that some of the participants have sent intimate photos of a sexual nature at some point, yet the strongly voiced dominant standpoint among the female participants was that they do not accept this kind of behaviour, with opposing standpoints and alternative experiences more or less silenced. Some of the participants even engaged in direct victim blaming:

Natascha: I just think that is so obvious if you send these kinds of pictures. You have to be aware of that, right when you do it, because until now everyone has known about incidents like that. Even if it happens at the gymnasium, the Realschule knows about it. That is why you have to think about it.

Interviewer: So, it is common practice that these pictures are shown to others?

Mia: Yes, you are actually to blame, if you send them. Because you should only send them to someone you really trust and are absolutely sure that the person doesn't do anything with them. And most of them… you can't actually trust them.

(The Consenting Group)

As is clear from these statements, the young people in the study focused on the unacceptable level of risk related to sharing intimate photos of a sexual nature, rather than the opportunities such practices afford with regard to establishing romantic intimacy and exploring sexual identities. This primarily seemed to be out of fear of losing their standing and reputation in the (female) peer group (see also Hansen in this issue). It would appear that public discourse about sexting as well as the spreading of rumours and nudes at their own high school had led the female participants in particular to dismiss such practices. Only two female participants, both part of The Dissenting Group, held a different standpoint. One of the scenarios in the focus group schedule involved a boyfriend passing around photos of his girlfriend intended for him only. When given this scenario, these participants pointed out that it is unfair to distribute something meant for you only. Whereas Laura declared this behaviour "antisocial", Kerstin stated: "You should be happy to get this kind of trust from a person by receiving this photo. If you show it around, it disgraces the person who does it even more than the person who has sent it". This statement was challenged by the other participants in The Dissenting Group, who emphasised the responsibility of the individual, leading Kerstin to further elaborate that everyone should respect the choices of others:

> I mean, you can of course say that you would never send anything like this because you
> do not dare to do so, but I expect that you will accept it if I decide to send these photos to
> you. It doesn't matter if something then happens to me or someone else – that is all the
> same – because everyone has his or her own attitude.
> (Kerstin, The Dissenting Group)

Kerstin tries to stand in for the girlfriend in the scenario and interprets the sharing of intimate photos as a sign of bravery and trust rather than condemning such behaviour as irresponsible. She views the practice as a "dare" rather than a mistake, something that entails risk but that also has a purpose. For her, it is a privilege to be sent these photos, as it signals trustworthiness and invites intimacy.

Risk taking in friendly and romantic intimacy practices

As is evident from the analysis, the focus group participants distinguished sharply between friendly and romantic photo-sharing practices. Almost all of the participants claimed to only engage in intimate photo sharing among friends. By sharing awkward and non-edited "extra not nice" pictures of themselves, they establish friendly intimacy. The risk of pictures being saved or distributed plays into this activity. It is part of the game, rendering the practice exciting and tempting and capable of building friendship. However, the participants' opinions changed drastically when romantic intimacy was added to the equation. Almost all of the participants were very sceptical about the practice of nude photo sharing and dismissed it as 'uncool'. They seemed to feel uneasy about the sharing of nudes, emphasising the risk of public exposure. Making reference to their peers' experiences and their awareness of the possibility of screenshotting, they maintained that they would never do it and even harshly criticised the whole act of doing so. In this way, risk taking was considered an acceptable aspect of friendly intimacy photo-sharing practices, but an unacceptable aspect of romantic intimacy photo-sharing practices, due to the unacceptable level of risk involved. Extending Livingstone's (2008) line of argument, this is where the balance between risk and opportunity 'tips', at least according to the young people in our study. Nevertheless, a few participants challenged this point of view and defended romantic intimacy photo sharing as a similar act of trust and 'dare'. In this way, the idea that risk taking may represent a productive and socially meaningful act, as suggested by Laurenceau et al. (1998), was only partly supported by the focus group participants, being true in the case of friendly intimacy practices but not for romantic intimacy practices. Nevertheless, this dismissive attitude towards romantic intimacy photo sharing appeared to run counter to the sheer depth of the focus group participants' alleged experience. Although almost nobody admitted to send nudes, they all claimed to know someone who has done so and stated that many photos are distributed. Indeed, the prevalence of this practice, as documented in other studies (Van Ouytsel et al., 2014,

2015, 2017), too, suggests that there may be a discrepancy between reported and actual behaviour.

We see at least two directions for further empirical inquiry that may clarify and elaborate on this apparent paradox. First, this study's methodology may have implications for its conclusions in a range of ways. Indeed, this investigation has utilised focus group interviews with peer groups of young people who are in the process of gaining their first romantic and sexual experiences. Thus, it is very likely that romantic relationships involve a higher level of risk from the perspective of the young people in question, with the more general theme of sexuality and romantic relationships affecting how they talk about intimate photo sharing. In other words, to this age group, sexual intimacy *as such* may represent a 'dangerous' topic and for this reason their attitudes towards sexting may be more dismissive. Moreover, friendly intimacy photo sharing involves the peer group in question and represents a shared experience that is easily addressed within a focus group context. In comparison, it is likely that some of the participants' initial experiences with romantic and/or sexual encounters are more tightly protected within the intimate sphere of couples and are hence less likely to be brought up in a group of peers. Thus, a methodology focusing on couples rather than groups of peers may yield alternative results. Second, the focus groups reflected a very pronounced gender differentiation with regard to risk and romantic intimacy photo sharing. It became clear that female participants are at greater risk and are much more likely to be held accountable in cases where intimate photos are shared beyond the intimate sphere. These double standards with regard to gender and intimate photo sharing are unsurprising and have been documented elsewhere (Ringrose et al., 2013; Lippman & Campbell, 2014). However, our study adds another dimension to this issue, which is the active participation of female focus group participants in this process. Stigmatisation is to a large degree established by young women, with harsh moral judgements of intimate photo sharing in this study primarily expressed by the female focus group participants. Only one of the female participants argued that this practice should be respected and recognised the problem of peers spreading nudes and associated rumours. It seems implausible, but it is the potential victims of slut-shaming who most vigorously participate in the act of slut-shaming in front of their peers. Such a somewhat paradoxical position faced by female focus group participants has also been addressed by Mandau (this issue) in this themed issue and requires further empirical research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, risk taking can be seen as a socially meaningful and productive act in the (re)production of intimate relationships. However, to the young people in our study, it was deemed more acceptable in the case of friendly intimacy practices as compared to romantic intimacy practices. This may be due to the specific life phase of the young people in question, that is, the otherness and perceived 'dangerousness' of the topic of

sexual intimacy to this particular age group. Moreover, this finding may owe to the focus group method applied, as peer-based focus group interviews tend to uncover themes that are commonly and safely shared among peers, but sexting may not be one such theme. A rather surprising observation was the way the female participants in the focus groups were simultaneously the most likely victims of slut-shaming and moral judgement following image-based sexual abuse, while at the same time the most active victim blamers. This apparent paradox has been addressed elsewhere in this issue (see Hansen, 2020, this issue) and calls for further academic inquiry.

In this way, our study adds an alternative theoretical and empirical framing of the concepts of 'risk' and 'risk-taking' to existing research on intimate photo sharing among young people, emphasising its socially meaningful and productive role in the (re)production of intimate relationships. This adds a new perspective to existing work on youthful risk taking focusing on 'edgework' and risk as a purpose in its own right (Hart, 2017) as well as being a way of dealing with the conditions of late modernity (Morrisey, 2008). While risk may very well be a purpose in its own right, it might also serve extrinsic purposes such as the establishment of intimate relationships beyond the context of the family. Furthermore, this alternative theoretical and empirical framing of risk can serve as a possible correction to prevalent notions of risk as something that should necessarily be prevented and minimised (see France, 2008; Turnbull & Spence, 2011 for a discussion). Indeed, according to the young people in this study, risk taking in the form of intimate photo sharing may in fact be a very rational and purposeful act and the consequences of avoiding it entirely may entail other types of social distress, such as a lack of social connection and genuine intimacy.

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