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Digitally mediated romantic interactions among college students

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Introduction

- 1 The social interactions involved in conveying sexual attraction or initiating romantic relationships are rife with emotional vulnerability and interpersonal risk. However, the technological affordances of mobile phones and social media provide illusory protection from these hazards as young people experiment with flirtatious interactions. Communicating via digital messaging, texting, and social media provides physical distance, concealment of facial expressions and body language, and asynchronous communication. All of these affordances make digital communication methods attractive for flirting because of the perception of reduced risk for embarrassment (Cupples & Thompson, 2010) as well as expanded time for planning and interpreting communication compared to in-person flirtation.
- 2 Digitally mediated flirtation is an omni-present part of American high school and college students' lives from early adolescence through their mid-twenties. An elaborate sub-culture of online flirting is developing among students in the United States with new social norms for flirtation and interactional meanings that are particular to their age cohort. The norms for flirtation among young people require them to, at least partly, rely on digital communication when they wish to convey sexual attraction or romantic interest, such that ongoing flirting between two people rarely takes place solely in person. Drawing on qualitative data, this paper examines the meanings behind the unique interaction rituals, social codes, and strategies used by millennials to flirt online as they relate to gender ideologies and persistent double standards of sexuality.

- 3 Even though flirting occurs through new technologies, old values and cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality continue to influence the interactions. To understand the ways in which historically rooted ideologies of gender shape the meaning of flirting for young people today, I rely on the concept of sexual scripts, first proposed by John Gagnon and William Simon (1974). Sexual scripts are culturally expected sets of behaviors that are shaped by social and historical forces (Gagnon, 1990; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). They provide people with social norms to follow when engaging in sexual behavior, including displaying desire, and are linked to gender identity and sexual identity. My research demonstrates that the innovations of digital communication have given rise to new sexual scripts. I explore how the affordances of internet communication technologies intersect with gender dynamics and the management of interactional risk in the shaping of what I call “digital flirtation scripts” which includes rules for flirting online as well as paradigms for interpreting online interactions.
- 4 My analysis is shaped by the body of work that theorizes gender as a performative process (Butler, 1990; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Empirically studying sexuality at the interactional level highlights the ways in which the gender binary system is maintained through everyday behaviors (Fenstermaker, West, & Zimmerman, 2002). Consequently, sexual scripts are dictated by the constraints of a gender system that is structured by social inequality and power (Connell, 1987). Fully examining gender dynamics requires understanding how gender and sexuality are intertwined through a system of heteronormativity in which the power structures that privilege masculinity also privilege heterosexuality (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). This heterosexist binary system leaves its mark on sexual scripts for all gender identities and sexual identities, including non-binary and non-heterosexual identified people.
- 5 Within this framework of gender and sexuality, I define flirtation as a form of communication that is intended to signal romantic and/or sexual attraction. Although flirting can be used for other purposes, such as signaling ongoing attraction within committed romantic relationships, I rely on the meaning of flirtation posed by classical sociologist Georg Simmel in 1911. He referred to the act of flirtation as an “enticing gamble” (p.143) in which two people engage in a dance of playfully calling into question the definition of their relationship in an attempt to convey attraction. It is a crucial moment when a relationship stands on the precipice of transitioning from acquaintance or friendship to romantic partnership (Ben Ze’ev, 2004; Tavory, 2009). Thus, flirting is often signaled through some sort of incongruous behavior that temporarily breaks through the intimacy barrier between two people. Flirtatious behavior is characterized by ambiguity and deniability so that it can be difficult to definitively identify an interaction as flirtation (Kozin, 2016; Speer, 2017). Flirting is risky for the initiator who must take a chance that s/he will receive the desired response in the hopes that their feelings of attraction are mutual.
- 6 The scant academic research on flirtation has conceptualized the act of flirting as an in-person interaction (Kozin, 2016; Speer 2017; Tavory 2009). Certainly, before the internet, flirting largely took place in person and included embodied signals, such as body language, touch, tone of voice, and facial expression. But now with digitally mediated communication, instead of physical flirtation cues, young people utilize digital cues such as emojis, selfies, and other graphics and images. In communicating flirtatiously, they also rely on metatextual symbols that are embedded within the communication but not literally part of the message itself, such as quantity and timing of text messages. If, as

Georg Simmel (1984/1911) claimed, flirtation is a form of play that requires partial self-concealment, the act of flirting is particularly well-suited to digital communication because of the mediated, asynchronous nature of online interactions.

- 7 Sexual culture for young people today is decidedly centered around digital communication and the unique characteristics of text messaging and social media platforms. Therefore, any study of adolescent sexuality should take into account technological mediation, although it is rarely the case. While there has been much research on online dating sites and apps (Albury & Byron, 2016; David & Cambre, 2016; Stephure et al., 2009), this format provides but one mode for digitally mediated flirtation and thus my study examines online flirtation in a broader array of contexts while also focusing on the unique characteristics of flirtation as a particular window into social interactions.
- 8 As a sociologist, I understand flirtation as a socially constructed form of interaction. I am interested in how interactional norms, such as language codes and collective meanings of emojis carry particular significance for students that is unique to their generational cohort. I am not interested in the idiosyncratic experiences of students as sites for examining their lives as individuals. I am more interested in the patterns of social formation made evident by their stories. By focusing on flirtation as a mediated social interaction, this paper highlights the formation of new social norms amidst shifting ways of communicating in today's digital culture. I illustrate the ways in which new interactional norms for digital flirtation, also known as "digital flirtation scripts," are both innovative and also reifications of existing social ideologies.
- 9 In what follows, I ask how social norms for digitally mediated flirtation among young people are shaped by gender, sexual identity, and perceptions of risk. Despite the potential of Web 2.0 for new interactional cultures, traditional ways of doing gender and double standards dominate the ways in which young men and women flirt online. The lowered interactional risk of the mediated environment may exacerbate the behavior of heterosexual men in terms of aggression and sexual lewdness. At the same time, women maintain more passive gender performances while also exercising social control over some men via digital technology. These traditional sexual scripts also permeate the digitally mediated flirtatious interactions of LGBT students. Students of all genders and sexualities voiced progressive ideologies of gender while also demonstrating internalization of traditional gender scripts. Making use of the spreadability of digitally mediated communication for enacting stigma contributes to the reinforcement of gender relations in digital flirting scripts. Ultimately, the conclusions of this paper have implications for deepening our understanding of gender, sexuality, contemporary youth culture, and internet mediated social interaction.

Adolescent Sexuality, Gender, and Digitally Mediated Communication

- 10 Research on adolescents' digitally mediated social lives has been extensive. Large scale studies on adolescent sociability in the United States and Europe, conducted by scholars such as boyd (2014), Ito (2010) and Livingstone (2009) utilize a child-centered approach in which the agency of children and the meanings they make of their everyday lives are the starting point for their inquiry and adolescence is understood as a social construct. Boyd's (2014) work contextualizes teenage engagement with social media as a

continuation of socializing with peers in public spaces that has moved online because of structural constraints on their physical freedom. She emphasizes the driving force of teen sociability over the desire to engage with the devices themselves and insists that internet communication technologies are simply a means to a necessary end, namely interaction with peers. Ito's (2010) extensive findings lead us to understand similarly that teen's online networks mostly mirror their local friendship networks. Livingstone (2009) highlights the balance between risk and opportunity in young people's internet use and the connection between shifts in adolescent identity and online practices as they grow older (2008).

- 11 My research bridges the gap between the literature on adolescent mediated sociability and adolescent gendered sexual behavior. As Deborah Tolman's (2009, 2012) work demonstrates, adolescent girls face a bombardment of conflicting messages about their sexuality at the same time that they should be developing sexual agency. Media messages about women's objectification constrain their sense of empowerment (Tolman 2012). Recent research on American college students' sexual behavior has focused on the declining significance of dating and the increasing normalization of casual sex, or what is termed "hookup culture" (Bogle, 2008; Wade, 2017). Authors who research college hookup culture emphasize the persistence of gendered double standards in shaping the sexual interactions of heterosexual college students (Currier, 2013; Fjaer, Pedersen, & Sandberg, 2015; Reid et al., 2011). Hooking up offers more benefits to men because of the prevalence of essentialist gender roles valorizing male sexual desire and promiscuity (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Reid et al., 2011). Although hookup culture may seem to offer women sexual liberation, their sexual agency is still constrained by traditional moral sexual standards (Armstrong et al., 2014; Currier, 2013; Wade, 2017). The hookup scene on college campuses is known to be heteronormative and thus most research focuses on hooking up among heterosexual students (Rupp et al. 2014).
- 12 Research on hookup culture and adolescent girls' sexuality has not adequately accounted for the role technology plays in high school and college students' relationships (Goluboff, 2015). Studies on the use of digital communication in students' romantic lives primarily focus on "sexting" or sending nude selfies via the internet (Hasinoff, 2015; Karaian, 2012; Ringrose et al. 2013). Given evidence from the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project that half of all American teens use social media to express romantic interest in someone (Lenhart et al. 2015), more studies like mine are needed to investigate the relationship between evolving digital and sexual cultures among young people.
- 13 Most of the scholarship related to digitally mediated romance is based on research with adults and focuses on online dating and sexual relationships (Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012; Stephure et al., 2009), rather than the process of flirting or initiating relationships. Numerous scholars have explored various aspects of internet dating ranging from topics as diverse as self-disclosure and veracity (Ellison et al., 2012), to effects on queer identity (Albury & Byron, 2016), and profile matching (Licoppe et al., 2015).
- 14 While sexuality and romantic relationships are widely studied by sociologists, there is a paucity of sociological research on flirtation (Tavory, 2009). The limited body of research that has been conducted on flirting through technology comes from a psychological perspective (Whitty, 2003; Whitty and Carr, 2003) and assumes that flirting happens online between people who do not know each other 'off-line' (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004). My research, on the other hand, supports the notion that digitally mediated flirting is an

integral part of romance and courtship among peers who are acquainted through school and community networks.

Research Method

- 15 The data and analyses presented here are based on interviews I conducted in the United States between 2015-2017 with 53 college students (ranging from eighteen to twenty-four years old) from a larger study that also included 57 high school students (ranging from fourteen to eighteen years old). For the larger study, I also interviewed two adolescent psychologists, two school principals, and one teacher on the subject of adolescents' mediated social lives. I began the investigation with interviews at a suburban mid-sized high school in order to investigate the impact of new communication technologies on gender dynamics among teenagers. These initial interviews helped refine the focus of my research and guide areas to explore in subsequent interviews with university students. All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded by the author in a metropolitan area in the Northeastern United States and then transcribed. In the sections of interviews excerpted below, I use ellipses to signify minor omissions for the purpose of clarifying the quotations. To analyze the data, I utilized an inductive coding technique (Charmaz 2003) with the qualitative analysis software program NVivo.
- 16 Due to ethical restrictions against asking minors specific questions about sexuality, I focused on gender more generally in the interviews with high school students. However, many high school students voluntarily shared information about their romantic relationships during the course of the interview sessions. Individual and group interviews with college students specifically focused on digitally mediated flirtation and were conducted on-campus. The excerpts analyzed in this paper are from the 53 individual and group interviews with college students and thus my sample description refers to that subsample only.
- 17 Of the 53 college students included in my sample, I interviewed 34 in groups (focus group interviews) and 19 in one-on-one interviews. All interviews were conducted in-person. Students' names are replaced with pseudonyms, of their choosing, to respect their confidentiality. I asked students to name their own gender identities, sexual identities, and racial identities. 29 college students were women, 20 were men, three identified as gender-fluid or gender-queer, and one as a trans-man. Participants used multiple terms for their sexual identities. 35 college students identified as heterosexual, of whom two said "mostly heterosexual." The remaining 18 students had a variety of non-heterosexual identities: three gay or lesbian, eight bisexual, three queer, two pansexual, one demi-pansexual, and one pan-romantic grey asexual. For the sake of simplicity, within the text of this article, I use the term "queer" to refer to students who do not identify as heterosexual. Racial composition of the college student sample is as follows: 40 white, five African-American or Black, four Latin-American, two Asian-American/Pacific-Islander, and two multi-racial. Although I did not ask for social class background, more than three quarters of the students at their university receive need-based financial aid. Although this leads to the assumption that many of the interviewees are working-class or lower-middle class, their experience as American college students provides them with educational privilege that undoubtedly influences the level of gender awareness evident in my data.

- 18 There are many benefits to using an inductive qualitative research design for this study. I was able to explore the context and meaning of flirtation for the college students themselves without superimposing my own definitions. Conducting one-on-one interviews allowed participants the freedom and privacy to share details about their life experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Conducting focus group interviews was also a useful methodology for my research since my study involves culturally constructed phenomenon (Krueger and Casey, 2009). In the focus groups, I was able to observe group dynamics and make note of consensus and disagreement on topics that are important to my investigation. To facilitate comfort among focus group participants, I grouped them together with other participants who shared similar gender and sexual identities.
- 19 I can make no claims about the generalizability of my sample as all students discussed here are from one university in a U.S. metropolitan area. However, I do believe that the study provides insights into the process of doing gender and sexuality in evolving cultures of digitally mediated communication. Although my sample is local, the experience of interacting online transcends geographical boundaries. Research participants interacted online with peers from nearby and faraway and described global trends in online youth culture. Studies conducted in countries such as Canada (Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie, 2006), the UK (Ringrose et al., 2013), and South Africa (Bosch, 2011) drew conclusions similar to mine that despite evidence of girls' playing with gender norms online, institutional gender inequality and contradictory online gender discourses persist.

Findings

Doing Gender through Emojis

- 20 Although the affordances of digital technology carry the potential to transform gender relations (Kolko, 1999; Yates, 1997), youthful online flirting culture largely reinforces dichotomous constructions of gender and heteronormativity. The meaning of text messages can change from friendly to flirtatious simply by adding emojis (Riordan 2017) or altering conventions of spelling and grammar. However, these digital cues for flirtation get operationalized in a gendered way. For instance, students describe clear social norms for female digital flirtation that reify stereotypical notions of femininity.
- Michelle: When I'm texting my parents I use proper punctuation and I put the correct amount of letters that are supposed to be in words. But if I'm texting a guy that I like, I'll probably be like, "Heeeey!" with a bunch of E's and Y's¹. Or I'll put a bunch of emojis. Like a little happy face or like a flower or something. To be kinda cute and light about it.
- 21 The ways in which young women use emojis to flirt function to emphasize femininity through emotion and tone. The types of emojis that women are expected to use when flirting are associated with cultural notions of femininity such as enthusiastic emotional displays, peppiness, and flowery flourishes. In this gendered performance, women maintain traditional gender norms by being indirect. Emojis act as substitutes for direct language as they communicate attraction obliquely through tone and implied meanings.
- 22 On the other hand, emojis accompany performances of hegemonic masculinity in a different way:

Sophie: The guys, they don't make it all light and cute and playful. I think they're supposed to be seen as like, "Oh yeah, you really like me. I'm the tough guy"... They want to be nice but they're not frilly nice kinda thing. That's the girl's role is to be super nice like "I'm gonna laugh and bat my eyes at everything you say." And the guy will just kinda like give you that smirk. So he'll send a smirk emoji...And the girls will put a little playful one with blush or something. So I think it's supposed to be more of the guy wooing the girl. And the girl, if she likes you back, she'll be playful back.

- 23 Here, emojis become symbolic of the embodiment of traditional gender roles, and the sexual script of flirtation as man "chasing" woman, in a digitally mediated disembodied form.
- 24 Emojis are an especially useful tool for queer women who wish to communicate attraction since the distinction between women's expressions of friendship and same gender flirting is often difficult to detect. Gender norms dictate that women can be more direct, intimate, and complementary in their platonic relationships with other women than men can be with their male friends. Thus, the queer women I interviewed explained that it's difficult to know when women are sexually attracted to them as opposed to just being friendly.

Rose: Yeah. I feel like I try to make it really obvious. I'll compliment them, but not – I mean, obviously, compliments can just be, "Oh you look nice!" And then somebody's just like, "Thanks." But I like to use a lot of emojis and the heart eye emojis and make sure they know. {Multiple focus-group participants: "And winky face!"} Yeah. Stuff that just kinda signals to them: "I not only think you're beautiful, but in a kinda gay way."

- 25 Riordan (2017) suggests that emojis are an expression of emotional labor that can enhance social connections. College students recognize that benefit when they use emojis in their flirtatious interactions as they call upon the collective meanings they have come to represent. However, emojis communicate more ambiguously than actual words themselves. Thus, replacing words with emojis in digital messages allows students to navigate the potential embarrassment that flirting entails by partially concealing their vulnerability. Digitally mediated communication has ushered in new sexual scripts for communicating flirtation in specifically gendered ways utilizing the non-verbal and non-physical innovations unique to online technology.

Doing Gender through Assertiveness

- 26 Another way in which traditional performances of gender still permeate expectations for online flirtation is that men are expected to take the initiative in expressing desire and to be more assertive in online flirtation. On the other hand, young women are expected to be coy, witty and provocative rather than direct and assertive. These traditional sexual scripts are enunciated by heterosexual and queer students alike and persist despite criticism from young people of all genders, exemplifying the contradictions of their gender ideologies and ambivalence about gender dynamics in practice.

Leslie: In person, I think females instigate [flirtation] a little more because females are viewed as sensitive and outgoing and very talkative. And when they're talking to guys it can come across as flirtatious. But I also feel like men or boys or guys do it more often through social media. Like when they comment on a girl's new profile picture or they make a comment like, "Hot. Wow. Attractive." I feel like that's a lot easier for them in a way.

- 27 Women report that men often overstep their personal boundaries when flirting which makes them feel uncomfortable. For instance, Michelle explains that she finds the way guys typically flirt online to be “rough” because of their persistence. She interprets persistence in terms of the amount of times they text in a row before waiting for a response.

Michelle: I think guys don't know how to tone it back. I think a lot of the times they can be a little bit overbearing or a little overpowering with how much flirting they do. So they might do that double text where they'll text you and then they'll text you again. So they made sure that you saw their text. {Interviewer: the same text?} Not of the same text, but they'll text you and they'll be like, “Hey, how was your day? What are you up to right now?” So there will be two completely different text messages. So your phone dings twice and you're like, “Oh, two people are texting me!” But it's really just the same person trying to get your attention. So I think that can be an overbearing way of trying to get someone's attention and flirt with them. Whereas I don't really know that many girls who do the double text or are super overbearing with flirting. Most of my friends, they wait for the guy to do it.

- 28 Here Michelle is referring to meta-textual communication rather than the content of the messages themselves. The frequency of messages sent and spacing between messages signals a distinctly masculine aggression for her.
- 29 Queer women had similar observations about gender dichotomies in digital flirtation cues, suggesting that these scripts are shaped by gender rather than sexual identity. In a focus group I conducted with bisexual women, participants bonded over their distaste for men who flirt in a sexually forward manner on the popular dating app Tinder. For example, in describing experiences flirting with multiple genders on Tinder, Rose and Tesla enunciate gendered double standards by comparing their experiences:

Rose: I've had a message from girls and ... it's so unusual if they're very out right, just sexual and stuff...Usually it's just very subtle and you have to find out rather than have somebody blatantly tell you, “I want to do this,” and all of this stuff.

Tesla: Then all the guys that would match with me, they'd be like, {said in brutish voice;} “Okay, let's screw!” I was like, “I just talked to you! You need to give me a minute.” But then all the girls would be like {said in shy nerdy voice;}, “I like your hair and your clothes are really pretty.” And I'd be like, “Are you hitting on me or are you just being nice?”

Rose: I'm sure all of us have experienced this, guys saying something crazy or just so vulgar or overtly sexual or just crazy... I feel like girls don't do that.

- 30 These excerpts suggest that cultural constraints on women's performances of sexuality inform sexual scripts for how women flirt with other women as well as how they flirt with men. The implications are that traditional gender socialization around sexuality make it more difficult for queer women to directly flirt with women and detect flirtation from women online.
- 31 Young people of all gender identities and sexual identities consciously and unconsciously participate in this cultural reinforcement of traditional gender norms through the ways in which they communicate sexual desire online. The ambivalence that young people feel about traditional sexual scripts was apparent in my interviews. Participants in a focus group of heterosexual men had an interesting discussion about the traditional sexual script in which they simultaneously distanced themselves from this narrative while also admitting that they are complicit in enacting it:

Interviewer: Are there differences in how women are expected to flirt with men through digital technology and how men are expected to flirt with women through digital technology?

Damien: I think yeah...Even if the goal is the same but the girl is more expected to beat around the bush. Then a guy makes the move. A guy is just expected to be straightforward about it.

Interviewer: Do people agree?

Draymond: Yeah. I would say also that it's still kind of the same type of gender rule that we were talking about that guys are supposed to make the moves at the girls. And it's just the concept of sexuality and virginity are things that are still prevalent in our society today, even though maybe they are dated terms. As guys, like you said, we should be more straightforward. Women are not allowed to have that same privilege. Like, "Let's do this." It's the guy's responsibility because that's just how it is and that's how it's been, you know what I mean? I don't personally agree, but I feel like in our society, girls are supposed to give you something to chase instead of being easy. And if both of us want the same thing, it's not really you being easy. It's us having an agreement. But, the guy is supposed to be straightforward. The girls are supposed to be a little bit protective, I guess you could say. But at the end of the day, a lot of these things are scripts and games, I would say.

- 32 It is important to highlight that my interviewees were asked to discuss double standards and thus they both discussed their experiences doing gender while flirting and also their views of those sexual scripts. In doing so, they were able to problematize gender inequality and constructions of gender that privilege male aggression and female passivity. No doubt these results relate to the fact that I interviewed college students whose level of education makes them more likely to think critically about social inequality; posing questions to them about gender likely exacerbated this reaction. However, the contradictions between their more feminist gender ideologies and descriptions of flirting experiences bely the unevenness of progress in the realm of sexual interaction. For instance, Gavin gave voice to these contradictions in recognizing that gendered double standards are connected to misogyny and gendered social structures:

Gavin: There's things like: girls aren't supposed to go up to guys and be like, "Hey, I like you. We should go out." Because girls for some reason think that guys are intimidated by that... And guys... they're supposed to be direct and go right to the point and be like, "Hey. You. Me. Date. Now," or something like that. So I think there are social – what was the word? {Interviewer: Norms. Like rules.} Yeah. There are rules. But I don't think they should be followed. I guess it kinda boils down to the whole: "Women belong in the kitchen." No they don't! They can go wherever they want. Whereas, they should be able to do – flirt with whoever they want.

Doing Gender through Sexually Explicit Communication

- 33 Due to traditional sexual scripts, men may feel pressured to flirt assertively which can trigger embarrassment when flirting face-to-face. Flirting through technology mitigates interactional risks for men, permitting them to be more sexually direct and assertive in their flirtatious communication. Research participants suggested that traditional sexual scripts may be expressed in a more exaggerated way when flirting online and that men can be more sexually suggestive because of the digital “filter” or the lack of physical proximity. Thus, digital communication technology becomes a useful option for men to use for flirting since it minimizes their sense of interactional risk. Hayley: “I feel like guys aren't as subtle. I mean some of them will just come out and say sexual things to you,

especially online because there's that filter of not being in person, and sometimes it'll be gross things."

- 34 Being sexually forward when flirting online is further facilitated by the technology because of the availability of non-verbal cues to express sexual desire, specifically emojis. For instance, emojis depicting particular fruits and vegetables have taken on the connotations of body parts in youth digital culture. Young men may feel bolder when faced with the opportunity to text a chain of emojis to suggest sexual activity (e.g. eggplant, water droplet, smirking face) rather than directly propositioning someone in words.
- 35 A normative practice for teens and college students is the sending of nude selfies or "sexting" (Hasinoff, 2015). This is another affordance of digital technology that is used in ways that reinforce gender inequities of power. In my focus groups with both queer and straight women, they expressed shared outrage at the lack of inhibition that men show when asking them to send nude selfies, even men who they barely know or have never met in person. Kristen: "They'll just come right out and ask you to send them pictures and that's flirting to them. Even if you haven't been talking to them for a while. And it's just like disgusting. I don't understand it. That makes me so angry."
- 36 Another practice that young women participants indignantly bonded over is the practice of men sending nude photos through digital messaging. It is such a widely shared experience that there is an abundance of internet memes mocking those who send such photos as a flirtation technique and a common catch phrase to describe the practice: "unsolicited dick pix." In a focus group with queer women, Sean, Carolyn, Alice, and Jane explained how they see "unsolicited dick pix" as a kind of non-consensual sexual interaction that feels similar to being touched inappropriately without permission. Gertrude explains that when a young man flirts with the intention of pursuing a romantic relationship, he is less likely to send such photos:
- Gertrude: I think guys in general are more forward and it's rarely appealing. Let's be honest. Like the pickup lines. I guess it depends on what they're pursuing, too. Because if they just want to hook up, then they're going to be gross and vulgar, [rather] than if they're actually interested in you. Then it would be less likely to be unsolicited pictures or whatever.
- 37 This culture of male sexual explicitness shapes not only how men flirt with women, but also how they flirt with other men. Hal, who is bisexual, claims men are too aggressive and sexual when flirting with him and thus he feels more comfortable with how women flirt.

Hal: I feel like when flirting with a girl – maybe this is a personal thing, maybe it's a general thing, but I feel like niceness and just in general trying to present yourself as pleasant are important...Whereas with guys, I find they generally are very direct in a way that – it makes sex and stuff – they'll be very blunt about it and I personally don't like it. It makes me a little uncomfortable, but that's just the general thing I've found. I feel like with girls in general, it's based on conversation, whereas I feel like with a lot of guys, it is based on sex... When I flirt with technology, I prefer to try to make a conversation, which, like I said, would hopefully lead to an in-person interaction. And I feel like when I do that with girls, I generally get more conversation, whereas I feel like when that's happened with guys, I generally get, like the stuff I was saying, blunt, related to sex conversation.

Digital Technology and Social Control

- 38 Social norms are reinforced through social control, or the imposition of social sanctions against those who break culturally constructed rules of behavior (Goffman 1986 [1963]). The social control of women is used to reinforce the traditional sexual scripts described above, associating masculinity with sexual assertiveness and femininity with passivity. Stigma through name calling is a common method of enforcing normative compliance for women who are perceived to transgress acceptable gender roles of sexuality (Armstrong et al., 2014). So-called “slut-shaming,” or the practice of negatively labeling women, reinforces gendered double standards (Attwood, 2007), hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987: 183-188), and male power. The affordances of digitally mediated communication provide unique social control mechanisms because people who act out of line can be publicly shamed in a quick, efficient manner. This is seen through the common practice among high school students of saving and forwarding girls’ nude selfies.
- 39 Young women who are assertive or act on their sexual agency receive stigmatizing labels, such as slutty, bossy, thirsty, or desperate², which consequently encourages other women to follow conventional sexual scripts in acting coy and passive. Michelle explains how this negative reputation even results for women who initiate digital flirtation: “For me, a social norm is that if a girl texts you first, they’re being too pushy already.” Women who directly communicate their sexual desire are stigmatized because they are seen as stepping outside of normative boundaries for feminine behavior. The stigma against women who take initiative in flirting and expressing their sexual desires functions to disempower them by scaring them away from expressions of sexual agency.
- 40 While students were critical of these double standards, they gave no evidence that they were able to resist them in their social interactions. In fact, Elijah, who identifies as heterosexual, demonstrated ambivalence about gendered norms for flirtation to the point of contradicting himself by reifying the stigma against sexually assertive behavior in women:
- Elijah: Everyone has their own way of flirting. And if a girl is very confident about herself, and she doesn't really have that filter about her, she may be the aggressor. But for the most part I would say males are doing the initiating. Personally, I like for it to be a back and forth type of thing. Like I start a little something, and then here and there. But I am turned off by a girl who's overly aggressive with her flirting, and just very obvious about it. So, if this girl that I just met this past weekend Snapchatted me with like, "Oh I'm so horny," and with a bunch of water emojis and eggplants. I would be like, "Get the fuck away from me, you sick fuck!"
- 41 The strong language used by Elijah, despite his critical stance towards sexism in other parts of the interview, is indicative of the enduring cultural thread of repulsion towards sexually expressive women.
- 42 Demonstrating how engrained these gendered double standards are in society, even bisexual women admitted to feeling the stigma
- Rose: You kinda just know what you're comfortable with, with a girl talking³ to you. Guys I expect them to say stuff like that, overtly sexual things. But for a girl, if they say that, I'm like, well, I don't know if I'm really into this. You might be kinda weird.
- Interviewer: That's interesting. Would you have that same response if a guy said the exact same thing?**

Rose: I mean, it depends on if I were talking to them for a couple, maybe a couple days, maybe a couple of weeks, that wouldn't be weird. I would feel that'd be fine. But I mean, even girls that'd be fine. But I feel like guys are just more reputable to be like that. That kinda just turns me off to be like, all right, no, I don't wanna talk to them. But for girls, I feel like that's just a – it just throws me off a lot if they act like that. Guys, I expect it, and sometimes I can deal with it and then other times I'm just like, no, they're weird, but with girls, I'm like, that's just really off-putting. Tesla: Yeah. Two things, one, with girls, it's weird for me to be like, "Yeah, you're really pretty." And they'll be like, "Let's screw right now!" I'm just like – I wasn't ready for that. But I'm used to that with guys. Guys are just like, "You're hot, let's go!"

- 43 The affirmation of traditional sexual scripts voiced by queer women here is evidence of the internalization of gendered oppression. Students' narratives about gendered double standards are contradictory because they too are products of a society which is organized around gendered structures of power. They simultaneously voice opposition to heteronormative gender ideologies that privilege male dominance in sexual interactions while also revealing tacit agreement with this ideology in their judgement of assertive women. While my participants seemed ideologically resistance to traditional sexual scripts, their disavowal is incomplete.

- 44 Social control of a different sort is exercised by women to men who surpass the limits of acceptable sexual behavior. Digital technology is sometimes used by women students to police men's sexual behavior. Male college students are keenly aware that if they transgress social boundaries when flirting with women online, their messages could be forwarded and spread around. Jason shared a cautionary tale about his friend who experienced such exposure and called this the risk of "having your business out on Front Street." In a focus group, heterosexual male students discussed the need to be careful when flirting online:

Draymond: Anything is fair game for any of them but you got to be cautious. You got to be a little bit more cautious with people that you do know, because things can get back to other people easier [online]. {Other participants: yeah, that's true!} If it's a person that you just met at a party, like say we went to [Urban University]⁴ tonight. If I meet a girl at [Urban] – I mean, I'm just saying this. I'm not going to care about what her friends think about as much as a girl that I know, because my people that I know, she knows. And, things can get around.

Interviewer: What do you mean? What would you be worried about?

Jonathan: Screen shots.

Draymond: And maybe the thirsty. Screenshot slide into their DM's⁵, you know what I'm sayin? You could be a perfect gentleman ... Also, just being seen as like, I don't know, a player. But even if you're not, even if you're just making conversation. It could just be determined different ways. It's tricky.

- 45 Here, Draymond is implying that a young man might think he's acting as a "perfect gentleman" when flirting digitally, yet his reputation could be ruined by the spreading of screenshots of his interaction. Thus, women who perceive men to be too aggressive or sexually lewd in their digital flirtation pose a risk to men by publicly shaming them online.
- 46 In a focus group with heterosexual women students, participants described the "fuck boy" stereotype as a promiscuous, sexually aggressive male who, as Kristen said, is "constantly asking you to hook up or trying to hook up with you." These students pointed out the double standards involved in the social construction of stigma:

Kristen: Because if a woman did the same thing she would be considered a slut.

Caterina: Yeah but when guys are fuck boys his bros are like good job. But when we do it everyone hates you, guys and girls.

Leslie: It's so degrading.

Crystal: And I feel like it's been a thing at least online and in the media where all females are banding together against fuck boy culture. So I don't know why they're still doing it. That doesn't make sense to me.

- 47 Here Crystal is implying the possibility of feminist resistance to gendered double standards using digital technology as a tool of solidarity. “Banding together” online to combat male privilege is a first step toward social change.
- 48 Women also use the affordances of digital communication technology to “ghost” or “block” men who transgress acceptable social boundaries. Roslyn: “It's much scarier for a guy to be aggressive and very, very overtly sexual with you. Especially in person, 'cause on texting and social media, you can just block them and be like, ‘You're creepy.’” Despite the association of femininity with passivity, these digital tools provide women with some semblance of control and security because they can maintain physical distance while still communicating their desires.

Conclusion

- 49 Doing gender isn't only a difference of interactional styles, but the representation of deeply held, historically pervasive structures of gender inequality. While digitally mediated communication is a new form of social interaction, it operates within the historic social structures of gender and sexuality. The spreadability and replicability (boyd, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2013) of digital communication technologies contribute to the collective reification of traditional sexual scripts, heteronormativity, and male dominance. On the other hand, I remain hopeful that those same technological affordances carry the potential to contribute to the breakdown of gendered norms in the future.
- 50 The ways in which interactional risk is both reduced and exacerbated by digitally mediated communication interact with gender to influence digital flirtation scripts. The “filter” of the screen makes it safer for women to reject men but it also may lead to more aggressive performances of masculinity. For those who transgress social norms, the spreadability of social media increases the risk of social stigma. Women who are seen as too assertive risk being stigmatized. Heterosexual men are at risk of having ruined reputations online when women spread stories about them. While digitally mediated communication offers more avenues for sexual expression and flirtation, in doing so, students must manage these interactional risks.
- 51 This study has implications for the study of gender ideologies and sexual behavior and is in agreement with research that shows the project of gender inequality is incomplete among millennials (Risman, 2018). The students I interviewed expressed considerable ambivalence about traditional sexual scripts and the process of doing gender online. Despite ideological opposition to gender inequality and regardless of sexual identity or gender identity, they revealed significant internalization of double standards of sexuality and traditional messages about gender roles. Gender operates at individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman, 2004). My findings demonstrate how gender schema may present inconsistently across these levels. As individuals the interviewees voiced opposition to traditional gender ideologies while reifying conventional sexual scripts at

the interactional level of doing gender. These kinds of contradictions between thinking and doing contribute to the enduring legacy of institutional gender inequality.

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ENDNOTES

1. Several participants, in both high school and college, mentioned the convention of intentionally misspelling “hey” in order to signify romantic interest.
2. In chapter 6 of Wade’s (2017) *American Hookup*, she explains that “desperate” is the most stigmatized label on college campuses.
3. The term “talking” is used by students to refer to an on-going flirtatious relationship that takes place primarily over technology.
4. The actual name of a large urban university is omitted here to enhance the confidentiality of research participants.
5. “Sliding into DM’s” is a phrase used to describe the practice of men flirting with women, usually in a suggestive way, by contacting them through direct messaging on Twitter. Here, the concern is that the men’s messages will be copied via screenshot technology and shared via text messaging or social media in order to embarrass them.

ABSTRACTS

The art of flirtation seems to have proliferated since the advent of Web 2.0 because, among other reasons, online communication is perceived as having lowered risk for embarrassment compared to in-person communication. My research explores the phenomenon of digitally mediated flirtation among American students that involves the formation of new sexual scripts or social norms for online interactions. Findings from interviews and focus groups with students at a small liberal arts college in the northeastern United States reveal the persistence of traditional gender norms within romantic relationships despite ambivalence towards sexual double standards. Heterosexual and queer students alike participate in the reification of gender inequality through their flirtatious interactions. Cultural constructions of risk, as shaped by ideologies of gender and sexuality, play a role in the development of online norms for romantic interactions. The inconsistencies between their awareness of gender inequality and their conventional approach to gender dynamics is evidence of the slow pace of social change in private relationships. This study has implications for understanding how heteronormativity and male dominance shape the ways in which young people do gender in the co-construction of developing digital cultures.

L’art de la séduction semble avoir connu un certain foisonnement avec l’essor du Web 2.0, notamment parce que la communication en ligne est perçue comme diminuant les risques de perdre la face par rapport à la communication en face-à-face. Cet article porte sur la séduction sur Internet parmi des étudiants d’université aux Etats-Unis et interroge la création de nouveaux scripts sexuels et normes sociales régulant les interactions numériques. Des entretiens et des *focus groups* conduits avec des étudiants d’une petite université au Nord-Est des Etats-Unis montrent la persistance de normes de genre traditionnelles dans les relations amoureuses, et ce malgré une certaine ambivalence envers le double standard des sexes. Les étudiants hétérosexuels autant que les étudiants *queer* participent en effet à la reproduction des inégalités de genre par le biais de leurs modes de séduction. Les constructions culturelles du risque, produites par des idéologies de genre et de sexualité, jouent un rôle dans le développement de ces normes qui traversent la communication en ligne. Le décalage entre la conscience qu’ont les étudiants des inégalités entre les sexes, et leur attitude traditionnelle vis-à-vis des rapports de genre, montre que le changement social est lent dans le domaine des relations intimes. L’article

éclaire la manière dont l'hétéronormativité et la domination masculine régulent la façon dont les jeunes « font le genre » à l'ère numérique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: genre, sexualité, séduction, communication numérique

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