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Negotiating a sexy masculinity on social networking sites

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Abstract

Social networking sites have emerged as spaces for both young men and women to portray themselves in sexualized ways, raising questions about how young men construct masculinity while embracing a kind of sexual self-objectification. In this case study analysis, a heterosexually identified male college student guides another male undergraduate on a tour of his MySpace profile in front of a video camera, supplementing the visual data with his own interpretations. The analysis focuses on how the young man takes up, or subverts, hegemonic masculinity in his sexual displays online. Data illustrate how irony is highly adaptive for perpetuating hegemonic masculinity on social networking sites, allowing men to collaborate using digital artifacts to socially construct an intractable kind of masculinity as they explore unconventional forms of sexual expression. The study also suggests that a heightened emphasis on public attention to the self is a critical lens for understanding shifting constructions of gender and sexuality in the millennial generation.

Keywords

Social networking sites, self-sexualization, hegemonic masculinity, irony, social constructions of gender

Introduction

The emergence of social networking sites as spaces for youth to express their sexuality has drawn a considerable amount of attention to the self-sexualization of young women online (Hall et al., 2012; Ringrose, 2010; Thiel-Stern, 2009). Yet studies are beginning to show that young men are also portraying themselves in sexually alluring ways on these Internet sites (Hirdman, 2010; Siibak, 2010). The rising prominence of a visual cyber culture in which male bodies are eroticized provokes questions about how young men construct masculinity while embracing

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a kind of sexual self-presentation that has been associated with femininity (see also Gill et al., 2005). Because masculinity is often defined in contrast and as superior to femininity (Connell, 1987; Mahalik et al., 2003), men's online sexual displays provide an opportunity to explore shifts in gender and power that are connected to new forms of self-representation in technologically mediated social interactions in Western societies. The current study takes a fine-grained approach to this issue, looking on an individual level how a young man who is invested in a heterosexual masculinity expresses his sexuality online.

Here, I present a case study of a heterosexually identified male college student leading another male undergraduate on a videotaped tour through his profile on the social networking site MySpace.¹ The analysis focuses on the digital representations of his masculine sexuality on the profile and how the participant explains and interprets his online behavior during the tour. The method has two advantages. First, the recording of the computer screen and the corresponding commentary permits an up-close examination of actual performances of gender and sexuality and the way these performances are positioned relative to other men. Analyses like these are needed to render theoretical notions of gender and power relevant to the everyday lived experiences, strategies, and understandings of actors themselves (see Speer, 2001; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Second, a case study can illuminate the nature of shifting positions within one individual as he navigates new territories of masculine sexualities online. This is important because multiple positioning is at the very heart of strategies for maintaining gendered power relations, especially when longstanding masculine positions are destabilized (Edley and Wetherell, 2001). The goal of the analysis is to contribute to a feminist psychology of masculinity by calling attention to the power dynamics at play as young people negotiate gender and sexuality through social media that have become so prominent in their lives.

Masculine sexuality

I conceptualize "performances" of masculine sexuality on the MySpace profile in this case study as a social process by which a young man manages positive impressions of himself under constraints of culturally shared meanings and ideals for masculinity (see Brickell, 2005; van Doorn, 2010). Indeed, research suggests that one of the primary motives of young people using social networking sites is to promote favorable impressions of themselves to their friends (Kramer and Winter, 2008; Manago et al., 2008), especially through photos (Pempek et al., 2009; Salimkhan et al., 2010). Moreover, online commentaries from the network in response to the subject's online expressions help define these shared meanings and ideals (boyd and Heer, 2006). Although the subject in this case study may have a personally unique way of "doing" masculinity in his MySpace profile, his performances reflect shared understandings of what constitutes valuable and desirable masculinities in his community.

Research on what is considered a desirable masculinity in the US finds that gender role ideals promote male sexuality as homophobic, emotionally restrictive,

promiscuous, and as having power over women (Mahalik et al., 2003). Although this trait approach to masculinity is useful, it also has limitations. Fixed, ahistorical characteristics are not conducive to understanding how notions of masculinity shift over time or the kinds of permutations masculine ideals take on in different contexts and situations (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, promiscuous masculine sexuality is not always idealized in heterosexual college men's reflections on their intimate relationships with women (Epstein et al., 2009). Sometimes, compelling ways of "being a man" are actually accomplished by disavowing conventional masculinity (Wetherell and Edley, 1999).

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) may be more useful for examining the nature of shifting masculinities. It is defined as strategies that place men in a position of power, both over women and over other subordinated forms of masculine sexuality, notably homosexuality. Rather than signifying normative traits, it represents symbolic ideals men must position themselves in relation to as they seek to behave in ways that will be deemed "manly". There are multiple ways of being a man, but they are all positioned in relation to the hegemonic ideal. Historical change is central to Connell's original theorizing of hegemonic masculinity (1987); multiple masculinities compete with one another for hegemony over time and in conjunction with sociocultural change. Although critics have pointed out the ambiguity of the hegemonic masculinity concept (Speer, 2001; Wetherell and Edley, 1999), I find it useful here to consider how the young man in this case study maneuvers to maintain a position of power in the face of potentially changing norms for masculine sexual self-expression online. Because hegemonic masculinity is about persuasion, ways of legitimizing the power of certain kinds of masculinities, it opens up ways to consider the strategies young men can employ to undermine conventional masculine ideals while still positioning masculinity as superior to femininity.

How might this be accomplished when ways of "being a man" incorporate characteristics associated with ways of "being a woman," such as sexually objectifying oneself on social networking sites? Early theorizing on gender in virtual social spaces pointed to the nature of "disembodied" communication online, suggesting that online articulations of gender could be disconnected from physical bodies and biological sex, opening up more fluid performances of gender less constrained by gender binaries (O'Brien, 1999; Rodino, 1997). Although gender norms (Herring, 2003; Subrahmanyam et al., 2006) and dominant heterosexual discourses (Muise, 2011) are sometimes transgressed through *text-based* communications, the Internet has become increasingly a visual medium, making the idea of online disembodiment less relevant. However, there are a variety of other affordances of online environments, in this case social networking sites, that could impact how gender is enacted online.

Affordances of social networking sites

Sexual expressions on social networking sites are constrained and enabled through the technology's "affordances," defined as opportunities for action that are

provided in the relationship between features of an object or environment and an actor's abilities (Hutchby, 2001). In other words, social media technologies have particular sets of capacities that are mobilized by users' capacities and proclivities. The first main affordance of social networking sites is the opportunity to perform to an audience in a public, or perhaps semi-public, online domain (Livingstone, 2008; Tufekci, 2008). Self-expressions are broadcasted to "networked publics," the entire collection of "friends" or contacts on the network tied to the user's profile (boyd, 2008). College students average about 370 contacts, the majority of them fleeting acquaintances (Manago et al., 2012). Contacts provide attention and feedback to individual performances on a profile, supplementing or augmenting them with additional meanings (boyd and Heer, 2006; Manago et al., 2008). In this way, the social networking profile represents individual identities as public conversations, an amalgam of social meanings created by the community.

A second major affordance is the capacity to articulate meanings through digital artifacts. As such, expressions on social networking sites resonate for longer periods of time than they would as fleeting utterances in offline conversations (boyd, 2008). They also take on the form of a variety of multimedia and visual metaphors, making them highly interpretive (Salimkhan et al., 2010). Hirdman (2010) suggests a culture of *hypervisuality* online with young people adopting symbolic repertoires for representing their physical bodies. Moreover, with social networking sites situated as another form of entertainment media online, visual self-presentations are enmeshed with pop culture. Youths' articulations of their identities on social networking sites often appropriate pop culture multimedia, brands, and symbols (Ringrose, 2010; Salimkhan et al., 2010). Pop culture has long penetrated the lives of youth, yet the ease and efficiency with which young people can recycle digital symbols from popular consumerist culture into online expressions suggests a magnified level of the phenomena.

Social networking site affordances and masculinity

How might these affordances constrain or enable young men's sexual expressions? The Internet, in general, opens up a space for the dissemination of a plurality of sexualities (Muise, 2011; van Doorn, 2010). One study shows that some sexual minority men publicly broadcast sexualized commentary with countercultural friends on social networking sites, thereby socially constructing into being alternative sexual identities that subvert heterosexual scripts (van Doorn, 2010). Another study demonstrates that heterosexual men are increasingly concerned with posting aesthetically appealing photos of themselves on social networking sites (Siibak, 2010). The body language in these photos suggests that young men seek approval from the viewer, a motivation often attributed to young women (Hirdman, 2010). Moreover, studies have demonstrated that young men publicly display tenderness and affection with their girlfriends on social networking sites, thereby performing more emotionally sensitive, rather than dominating, masculinities (Elm, 2007; Mod, 2010; Muise et al., 2009; Utz and Beukeboom, 2011).

Yet, social networking sites could also be well suited to the project of maintaining hegemonic masculinity. The public exposure of sexual expressions on the virtual stage of social networking sites, and their subjection to peer scrutiny and judgment, creates a situation that can heighten the pressure on young men to prove their masculinity to peers. Ethnographic research shows how adolescent boys use social media technologies to police each other's behaviors to negate femininity and homosexuality in the same way that they do offline, but now on a more heightened, public level (Pascoe, 2011). The teasing and homophobic harassment that exist in fleeting conversations offline are now digitally reproduced and broadcasted to more expansive audiences, perhaps intensifying the pressure to conform.

In addition, the infiltration of pop culture on social networking sites may perpetuate the legitimacy of conventional hegemonic masculinity. Entertainment programming and advertisement aimed at youth are rife with messages depicting masculine sexuality as powerful, non-relational, and promiscuous, while sexually objectifying women (Ward, 1995). With cross-media convergence, youth can both consume these media and create their own performances all on one platform, seamlessly integrating the two. Qualitative work shows that adolescent girls incorporate iconic sexual imagery such as the playboy bunny into their social networking site profiles (Ringrose, 2010), and young men recycle sexually objectifying images of women from popular media into their profiles (Pascoe, 2011). The convenience of these kinds of sexual images can limit youths' experimentation with alternative sexualities online.

Pop culture may also be influential in its communication strategies, which may be adopted by young men as a way to negotiate the tension between conforming to hegemonic masculinity and shifting online gender norms. Irony is an important way lad magazines, for example, promote consumerist goals such as marketing male grooming products that threaten to "feminize" men (Benwell, 2002; Coy and Horvath, 2010). Irony allows men to disavow associations with all things feminine, thus a hegemonic status quo is maintained even as men adopt practices associated with femininity. Irony also appears in young men's peer interactions as a way to avoid appearing sexist or misogynistic and to infuse emotionally vulnerable positions with nonchalance (Korobov, 2005).

One can imagine that irony would be useful on social networking sites. First, it would allow young men to cloak sexism so as not to offend the diverse and expansive public audiences that exist in their networks. Second, irony combined with the interpretive and ambiguous nature of digital artifacts as a form of personal expression grants versatility to hegemonic masculine positions. Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) indicates that ambiguity is an effective mechanism by which hegemonic masculinity is perpetuated. In other words, the murkiness of irony affords young men more leeway to explore alternative kinds of masculinities online while still maintaining hegemonic masculinity. The goal of this study is to provide concrete examples demonstrating how this might be accomplished as young men negotiate standards of masculinity on MySpace.

Methods

Participant

This case study focuses on a heterosexually identified college student, “Bijan” (a pseudonym), a 20-year-old undergraduate at a large metropolitan university in the US and a first generation Persian from an upper middle-class family. Hanassab (1998) has found that Persian-American youth manage competing cultural frames of meanings for sexuality; one is more traditional, with sexual relations tied to notions of arranged marriage, procreation and family obligation; the other is influenced by individualistic values in the US that feature more sexual exploration, freedom, and independence. Traditional Iranian culture is patriarchal, conferring more freedom and power to men over women in sexual relations. This power imbalance can become magnified among Iranian-American youth through endorsement of the sexual double standard (Hanassab, 1998). When adapting to the more sexually liberal cultural context of the USA, immigrant families expect their daughters to remain chaste and preserve cultural traditions, while allowing more freedom to their sons for sexual exploration. The sexual double standard is certainly a component of sexual discourses in the US (Crawford and Popp, 2003; Kim et al., 2007); however, the principle may have a particular association with traditional cultural frameworks among Persian-American youth. In these analyses, I consider Bijan’s Persian-American biculturalism and also the ways in which he may be negotiating a marginalized masculinity as a Persian man of color in the US.

Bijan reported first getting a MySpace account during high school to connect with his high school friends outside of class. He indicated that he logs into MySpace seven days a week and spends on average about 20 minutes on the site each time he logs in. Bijan set his profile to private so that only friends in his network can see his profile, and his friend list is numbered at over 400 “friends,” a large portion of which, he says, is comprised of his Persian-American community.

Procedures

Data for this study came from a larger study that examined visual self-presentation on MySpace. Data were gathered during the tail end of the height of MySpace popularity in the US. Participants were five male and five female college students recruited from introductory psychology classes for a study described as “research examining how college students use social networking sites.” The only requirement for participation was having an active MySpace account and the advertisement indicated that students would receive course credit for their participation.

When participants arrived for the study, researchers explained that they would be asked to provide a videotaped tour of their MySpace profile, the video camera recording only their voice and the computer screen. They were informed that visual elements of their profile, along with their explanations, would be used in qualitative data analysis for research purposes and that their anonymity would be protected if any of their data were published. Researchers emphasized that students could withdraw their participation from the study at any time, without repercussion.

Participants were then presented with two consent forms: in the first they could choose to agree (or not) to having their visual and auditory data subject to analysis; in the second they could choose to agree (or not) to having videotaped recorded visuals from their profile published in an academic journal or conference presentation. Bijan signed both consent forms, agreeing to allow researchers to both analyze and publish his visual data. However, to protect his identity, his visual data will not be published.

After the consent process, participants gave undergraduate research assistants tours of their profiles in person next to a computer monitor in a private room and provided explanatory commentary to contextualize profile content. A same sex undergraduate researcher conducted the interviews while another same sex undergraduate researcher managed the video camera. Interviewers followed a script and were trained to refrain from responding to participants' profiles in any way that appeared judgmental, approving, or disapproving. The focus of the original study was on participants' profiles, not on the interaction between the undergraduate researchers and the participants. However, for the purposes of this analysis, it is acknowledged that the participant's explanations are set in the social context of impression management to same age male peers. Participants began the tour with the "about me" section, and then moved on to cover other features of the profile including the comment wall and photos. Interviewers asked general questions such as "Choose five photos that are significant and tell me about them," but also tailored the questions to flow with the direction of the participant in the tour. Tours lasted between 30 and 90 minutes depending on how much the participant wanted to disclose. The computer monitor and the conversation were videotaped and then transferred to Inqscribe for transcription and analysis.

Data were revisited after studies emerged showing that young men were adopting sexualized self-presentations online (Hirdman, 2010; Siibak, 2010). Inspired by these findings, the five male interviews were reexamined to see whether any of the participants were presenting themselves in sexualized ways because the original study was not designed to examine sexual expression. Although some sexual motifs were present in all the male interviews, they were strikingly prevalent in Bijan's interview far above all the others. Thus, a case study analysis was conducted to examine how Bijan expressed himself sexually online and how he made meaning out of it when explaining his profile to a male peer. Expressions on the profile took place far before the interview was scheduled (indicated by time marks) and there was no evidence that Bijan altered his profile prior to the interview. It is important to note that this case study represents enactments of masculine sexuality by an individual particularly invested in using social networking sites to express himself in sexualized ways.

Analysis

Major incidents in the tour that pertained to sexuality and romantic partnerships on social networking sites were selected for analysis from the entire corpus of data in Bijan's profile tour. Minor mentions of sexuality were not analyzed; "minor"

incidents insinuate sexual themes only tangentially. Data are both visual and textual; the participant's commentary was analyzed alongside images of the videotaped recording of the profile on the computer screen.

A thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was conducted to identify themes in the data selected for analysis. Themes were derived inductively from the data but guided by a theoretical framework that considers young men's sexual expressions as social constructions, involving negotiations of dominant ideologies of masculinity. The analysis explored each incident of sexual expression in terms of how Bijan either takes up or subverts hegemonic masculinity and then grouped the incidents into major themes for doing so. To be counted as a theme, there had to be more than one incident illustrating the pattern.

Theme 1: Rebellious masculine sexuality

Throughout his profile tour, Bijan is unabashedly forthcoming about his sexual expression on MySpace, a boldness reinforced by an underlying sentiment in Bijan's comments that masculine sexuality is incorrigible. Portrayals of a rebellious kind of masculine sexuality first surface in the tour during a discussion of Bijan's official motto, which reads "99% angel." In his commentary below, he indicates the sexual subtext of the quote's meaning, using the word "naughty." Bijan explains that the quote is ironic; he is conjuring notions of masculinity through its incompatibility with an angelic kind of femininity that is innocent and pure. In this discordance, Bijan, with the help of his friends who extend the joke through public commentaries, constructs his masculine sexuality as intractable.

Bijan: You know like 99% angel and 1% devil is something like a girl would have, implying like their devilish side, like a little bit naughty. I just thought that whole idea was funny, especially if a guy puts it up.

I: What kinds of reactions (on the profile) did you get?

Bijan: Yeah people are like . . . you're not 99% angel, you know.

Feedback from the network affirms Bijan's definition of masculinity, a variation of "boys will be boys," and also helps to associate this meaning with Bijan's identity. Bijan's construction of an ungovernable kind of masculine sexuality hinges on his depiction of female sexuality in the quote as an idealized virtuousness that is just "a little bit naughty." "Naughty," has a variety of sexual connotations for women in popular culture, from a kind of infantilizing mischievousness to asking to be "punished" sexually. It is unclear exactly how Bijan is associating the word with women's sexuality. Yet, it is safe to say that he highlights a masculine sexual freedom by contrasting it with women's sexual desires, properly restrained 99% of the time.

Bijan employs this rhetorical device, associating himself with the feminine for a comedic ironic effect, a number of times on his profile. At first glance, it suggests a new kind of exploration, a kind of gender play where young men are increasingly embracing the feminine into their self-presentations online. A closer look

demonstrates that it serves to reinforce masculine and feminine dichotomies. By parodying the feminine, Bijan distinguishes the masculine, thereby asserting associations between power and masculinity as distinct from femininity. In his “99% angel” motto and in the following discussion surrounding Bijan’s “Who I’d like to meet” section of his profile, the kind of masculine power Bijan tends to highlight is characterized by ultra-independence and the privilege to live outside the rules that others (women) follow.

The “Who I’d like to meet” section of Bijan’s profile consists of two images that work together to graphically position rebellious masculinity hierarchically to subordinate feminine sexuality. Bijan explains the juxtaposition of the two images.

Bijan: . . . I thought this photo shoot [of a famous actress/sex symbol] was amazing and I fell in love with her so I put her first but then I saw this video of this British party boy and he was just so unbelievably bad-ass and funny to the newscasters because he threw a big party and he ruined all his neighbors’ property . . . the newscaster was like, look at yourself and what you’ve done and he’s like ‘I have looked at myself and I love it’ . . . he did such a bad thing to the community, he didn’t care, his reactions were amazing so I put him as who I’d like to meet first.

I: Any reactions to these?

Bijan: Well I think all my friends really like this guy and we all respect him a lot just because of the way he acts and also my friends think she is really hot too, which she is.

The contrast Bijan sets up in this section of his profile is so vivid that it is hard to miss the point. His professed “love” for the sex symbol communicates a kind of sexuality that is compelled not by an actual woman, but by imagery. The “accidentally sexy” image, recycled from the lad magazine *FHM*, is an impossibly beautiful sex kitten with a tiny waist and a big bosom, swathed in pink and white, turning coyly away, and holding onto the stairs of a bunk-bed. The picture elicits positive feedback from his friends who “think she is really hot too, which she is” confirming that the appropriate object of male sexual desire is innocently sexual with a soft porn aesthetic.

Yet, the actress plays second fiddle to “British party boy” in the ranking of who Bijan would like to meet (“I put him as who I’d like to meet first”). Bijan virtually arranges masculinity, in the form of renegade who takes full ownership of the destruction of neighbors’ properties, hierarchically to the feminine sex object. Bijan’s statement, “we all respect him a lot just because of the way he acts,” constructs a consensus of reverence for what the image represents, its antisocial message softened by humor. The heroism of British party boy’s self-interest can be extended to the sexual realm in its juxtaposition with photo of the sexy actress; men make up their own rules and women play to the whims of male desire for a hypersexual woman who is at the same time unsullied by her own sexual desires. Also, the juxtaposition highlights how hegemonic masculinity functions by idealizing women for their looks and men for what they do. This very dynamic of males consuming female sex objects is destabilized when men sexually objectify themselves online, a matter that is illustrated in theme three. But before delving into

male self-objectification on MySpace, I explore the way in which Bijan extends the notion of rebellious masculinity into the realm of uncontrollable male sexual desire.

Theme 2: Voracious masculine sexuality

The notion that men experience their sexual feelings as uncontrollable is a component of the heterosexual script on mainstream media that reinforces power inequalities (Kim et al., 2007). Uncontrollable male sexuality also reinforces the idea that masculine sexuality is rebellious or ungovernable. In theme two, Bijan and his friends leverage an ungovernable masculine sexuality to mock homosexuality and pedophilia, thereby constructing masculine sexuality as voracious while at the same time upholding a heterosexual script in which homosexuality is deemed repugnant. These maneuverings are evidenced in a photo Bijan shows to his interviewer entitled “Central American Pleasure.” Bijan sits in a chair on a beach getting his hair braided by a local; meanwhile, a young boy of color, about five years old, is squatting in between Bijan’s spread legs, facing Bijan’s nether regions.

Bijan: This kid’s ball fell in between my legs and his head was right in my crotch just in there for minutes trying to get his ball and my brother just thought it was really funny and he took a picture and as a joke I put “Central American pleasure,” I thought it was funny.

I: What kind of comments did you get?

Bijan: People laughing... pretty much nasty stuff because obviously it’s kind of a disgusting thing to put up (laughs) but I don’t really have a problem with it, you know I’m very comfortable because it’s just a joke.

The camera scrolling through friends’ posts under the photo uncovers raunchy comments from male commenters such as this one: “Hey you gotta take it any way you can I feel you” to reinforce the notion of potentially uncontrollable sexuality. The tour later reveals a number of lewd exchanges on Bijan’s comment wall mocking homosexual desires, such as this comment from a male: “... there was a picture of you naked . . . I want you in me please, and then I want u to want me in u.”

This mockery of sexual come-ons denigrates homosexuality, and combined with smutty jokes about pedophilia, associates homosexuality with child abuse while also configuring male sexuality as voracious. Bijan’s comments that the Central American Pleasure photo is “disgusting” but he is “very comfortable because it is a joke,” signal that the absurdity of his humor functions to negate the viability of pedophilia while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that masculine sexuality is ravenous and insatiable, devouring even inappropriate forms of sexual satisfaction such as children. The jokes about homosexuality are also so vulgar as to undermine homosexuality while also shoring up masculine sexuality as so tremendously powerful that it transcends even conventional injunctions against homosexuality. In this way, voracious masculine sexuality further sanctions the power of masculine rebelliousness that appeared in theme one and reinscribes violations to masculinity back into the hegemonic stance.

Moreover, in the Central American Pleasure example, the sexualization of power takes a particular turn in its reference to child sexual exploitation and sex tourism, which rest upon a racist power imbalance between the first and third world. I suggest that Bijan's marginalized masculine identity comes into play, in that as a person of color, he may lack the power of white male privilege, yet aligns himself with it in relation to Central America in this joke. Coston and Kimmel (2012) suggest that men with marginalized masculine identities (i.e. disabled, working class) may resort to a number of strategies to compensate for this deficiency, one of which is *normification*, minimizing differences between subordinated and dominant groups by capitalizing on other forms of power that they do possess. In this case, Bijan may capitalize on his affluence as a wealthy tourist to emphasize his alliance with white male privilege in the third world manifest in sex tourism and exploitation.

The first two themes have illustrated the way that MySpace affords Bijan and his friends the opportunity to transmit and promote dominant and sexist forms of masculinity under a shroud of irony and jocularly. The versatility that irony offers is also quite useful for distancing masculinity from femininity when showcasing sexy male bodies on MySpace.

Theme 3: Male bodies as sexual objects

One way that young people now construct their sex appeal is by posting titillating photographs on social networking sites that advertise their bodies to their friends, who will then appraise the image according to its level of "hotness." Bijan and his friends partake in this practice, broadcasting sexually objectifying photographs of themselves, but suffusing the photos and accompanying digital commentary with just enough humor to deny implications that they are concerned about others' evaluations. In one example, Bijan shows the interviewer a picture of him and his five buddies posing in nothing but their underwear for a costume party. One young man lies on the ground on his side mimicking sexual availability, another one poses with one hand on his hip, his head tilted coyly, two others hide behind the crowd, while another holds himself stiffly, smiling and feigning a punch to the chest of the young man at the center of this male revue, Bijan. Bijan is wearing tight spandex underwear, his legs splayed wide in an exaggerated fashion to shamelessly expose his fit body as he gazes dramatically off into the distance.

Bijan: Oh I like this one . . . we're all just getting ready to go to a costume party and my mom got me these really really cool undies, they're like tropical seascape, I don't know how to explain it but it's basically just amazing.

The camera spans to other photos Bijan has posted of himself, with male friends, in various states of undress and buffoonery. The photos, Bijan's exaggerated postures, and his comment about his amazing underwear are all reminiscent of the ways "feminized" forms of masculinity emerging with a "consumerist imperative" are reinscribed into a hegemonic form of masculinity through parody (Benwell, 2002).

In the case of social networking sites, there seems to be an imperative to present oneself as a visually appealing image, a preoccupation that has long been associated with women and the effects of the media (Kilbourne, 1994). Under the guise of humor, Bijan can embody and repudiate sexy poses and lingerie all at the same time, never fully committing to any one position. Without the humor and exaggeration, Bijan might be interpreted as falling into the feminine trap of caring too much about how he looks or as seeking approval from others, which would place him in a subordinate position associated with women.

In addition, although these visual data speak to male sexual self-objectification, the photos do not evoke a kind of exploitation that women's self-sexualized photos do. In her analysis of the display of male bodies in advertising, Bordo (1999) argues that while female bodies are fetishized with notions of modesty, illusion, and sexual fantasy, male bodies have long been represented as no-nonsense, utilitarian figurations. Thus, male nudity does not carry connotations of vulnerability, such as being stripped and exposed, that are associated with the removal of a women's clothing. This phenomenon allows Bijan to garner attention to his body without being susceptible to potential impressions that he is a victim of sexual exploitation.

Indeed, sexual displays are an efficient attention-getting tactic on social networking sites (Manago et al., 2008; Ringrose, 2010). Youth put forth images of their sexual selves and receive confirmation from their peers that they are attractive and worthwhile, granted that their bodies conform to cultural standards. Like women who can only access sexual "empowerment" if they conform to narrow definitions of female beauty (see Gill, 2008), Bijan accesses the privilege of being an attractive youthful male by having a thin, toned, and able-bodied physique. We see the psychological advantages this privilege confers as Bijan describes the rewarding self-validation he experiences from the comments he received on his profile for his sexy photos:

I: How does it make you feel getting all these comments on that picture?

Bijan: I like it, just in general getting comments, regardless of really what they say. I just like getting comments to see that people like the picture.

An examination of the 15 comments in total that Bijan receives for his underwear picture demonstrate how effective his tactics are for constructing a sexy persona obfuscated in humor to preserve a hegemonic masculinity. Young women's comments, "Sexxy" and "would you look at those thighs!" help validate Bijan as attractive to women (they also reverse the female attention-getting and male attention-giving gender roles, perhaps opening up new spaces for young women to feast their eyes upon rather than being feasted upon). Bijan's male friends bolster the idea that these displays are not to be taken too seriously by endorsing his sexual expression through more humor. Two comments from young men, "hhha nice bro" and "Dude this is so hot," contribute to the joke with more irony that flies in the face of the homophobic slurs young men use to regulate the masculinity of their peers (see Pascoe, 2011). The effect is to legitimize Bijan's sexual expressions so that they transcend traditional regulations for masculinity. The comedic antics

from peers reinforce male sexual objectification as distinctive from its feminine counterpart while bestowing attention in the form of virtual applause on the bearer of the image. In this way, Bijan and his friends construct the illusion of a kind of ungovernable masculinity that has the power to exist outside of the rules, that is, one that can benefit from feminine strategies for attention while negating its very association with femininity.

Theme three exemplifies how the irony used to maintain a hegemonic masculine stance in the first two themes can act as a shield from potential vulnerability when young men seek attention for their physical physique on online. However, as the next two themes illustrate, this fortress of masculinity may be more penetrable when it comes to negotiating a romantic relationship on MySpace.

Theme 4: Displays of masculine affection to women

In this theme, Bijan's ultra-independence and vulgar jokes give way to connection and public exchanges of affection and sentimentality with his girlfriend. Bijan's profile tour demonstrated a number of effusive comments on his wall from his girlfriend (i.e. "I know you love me boi...bc you k-razyyy about my bunsss mmmhmmm love you billy buns smooches"). Although the messages he wrote on his girlfriend's wall were not accessible, Bijan indicated that the comments were reciprocated and that he enjoyed the sentiments.

I: Pick out a couple of comments on your wall that have the most significance to you

Bijan: Ok, this is one that my girlfriend sent me, it's really uh, love-y dove-y. She wrote, (reads message), that sounds really lame but it's just that we talk like that you know, I always talk about her buns and she talks about my buns... we call each other silly billy

I: Why do you think that she put that in a comment instead of a message?

Bijan: I think most people like to communicate with comments because it's more public and you like to have stuff on your wall as opposed to private...

Mod (2010) has noted that public displays of affection between heterosexual couples on social networking sites function as a way for youth to show off their relationships to peers. Young men may engage in public articulations of their romantic partnerships for a number of reasons, to legitimize the relationship to their community, but also to reinforce bonds or to exhibit that they are worthy of devotion from women. The sensitivity, and perhaps vulnerability, portrayed in these comments could attenuate the "tough guise" stance, making the public nature of social networking sites a potential motor for change in the construction and experience of masculine sexualities. Showcasing relationships on social networking sites exposes emotional intimacies, dismantling the public-private division that allowed men to experience a sensitive kind of masculinity with their partners and a hard masculinity to their larger public communities. The proliferation of social networking sites and concomitant public displays of relationships could make tenderhearted kinds of masculinities more visible.

However, the next theme illustrates Bijan's shifting positions in relation to his girlfriend within the context of MySpace. This public broadcasting of personal self-expressions and social interactions creates new kinds of power dynamics in romantic relationships, a terrain in which the strategies of a hegemonic masculinity appear once again.

Theme 5: Resistance to partner vigilance

The design elements of social networking sites, such as the relationship status feature and the comment wall, afford new opportunities for young people to declare the exclusivity of dating relationships to their networked publics and to monitor their partners' social activities, both of which can accentuate notions of possession and territory in those relationships (Mod, 2010). This issue comes to the fore in Bijan's profile tour when he talks about thwarting his girlfriend's attempts to proclaim their relationship territory. The first example arises out of a discussion of the song that plays on Bijan's profile, a hip-hop track featuring fantasy motifs such as strip poles and threesomes. The commentary that the song elicits is about his girlfriend monitoring his behaviors:

I: And have you received any responses to . . . your music?

Bijan: Yeah every once in a while I'll put a song up that one of my friends or my girlfriend might find funny or makes her remember about my ex-girlfriend, makes her want me to take it off . . . just different things I don't know . . . (laughs) I definitely get feedback for my music.

I: And how does that make you feel getting feedback?

Bijan: I think it's cool because, like, you know that your action of changing the song is gonna cause some, uh, (pause) either controversy (laughs) or just get people's reaction.

Bijan discusses his girlfriend's vigilance of his profile a number of times throughout the tour. It points to the importance of audience to constructions of masculinity, both in terms of the contributions audiences provide through public commentary, but also in terms of the expectation of being watched. The Internet and cell phones have drastically increased the ease and efficiency by which young people can potentially monitor, stalk, or control their romantic partners (Melander, 2010). Because young women tend to use social networking sites more than men, research finds they are more likely to use this tool to monitor their boyfriends' profile pages, which can lead to jealousy and relationship insecurity (Muise et al., 2009; Utz and Beukeboom, 2011). This introduces new kinds of power dynamics in relationships.

Bijan's tour demonstrates how the power that comes with increased capacities for partner monitoring can be wielded against women. Bijan's emotional stance (laughter) as well as his commentary ("it's cool because you know that your action . . . is gonna cause some . . . controversy") constructs his girlfriend's vigilance, not as oppressive, but in terms of his own power to effect some kind of change in her emotions. Instead of emphasizing the ways in which his girlfriend might be pressuring him to change his behavior on his profile, he directs attention to the

ways in which his performances on MySpace impact her, effectively transforming the experience of being watched into an experience of agency. In this way, Bijan reverses the increased power endowed to his girlfriend through this new technology, or at least presents it this way to the undergraduate interviewers. In effect, by posting a song that reminds his current girlfriend of his ex-girlfriend, Bijan seems to retaliate against his girlfriend's power to police his behavior on MySpace.

Resistance to his girlfriend's surveillance, as well as her desire to proclaim their relationship territory to their network, is even more perceptible during the excursion through Bijan's "Details" section on his profile. There, he performs a free-wheeling sexual persona at least partly in response to his girlfriend's vigilance.

Bijan: For this section I went for basically funny-slash-serious. So for status, even though my girlfriend wants me to change it to "in relationship," I have it as swinger because being swinger is a lot funnier . . . it's a cooler status you know, instead of in a relationship you are swinging around from girl to girl . . .

I: Any reactions?

Bijan: Well my girlfriend says you're not a swinger change it to "in relationship" and I said ok ok I will but I never will.

Bijan resists his girlfriend's vigilance by putting "swinger" instead of announcing his commitment to her. In doing so, he constructs his masculine sexuality as independent and promiscuous rather than beholden to his commitment. His resistance to the power of his girlfriend on MySpace is further enacted later in the tour when the conversation turns to whether or not Bijan's girlfriend has "in a relationship" on her status. Bijan navigates to her profile to check. He finds that she has also put "swinger" in her details section. Bijan says:

"She used to have 'in a relationship' but she saw that I was a swinger and since I didn't change it she put it so I would get mad or something but I don't care."

In presenting himself as unconcerned by his girlfriend's actions on her profile, Bijan preserves his position as emotionally in control to the undergraduate interviewer. He also reframes the potential power of his girlfriend's surveillance as weak and dependent rather than as having control. He accentuates this quality in his girlfriend by once again constructing himself as the opposite, that is, detached and unaffected by her.

Discussion

The profile tour demonstrated the strategies by which young men collaborating in every day social exchanges on social networking sites lend value and legitimacy to hegemonic masculine fantasies. There was evidence of subtle shifts in masculinity, with male bodies idealized as objects for the viewer's gaze and tender-hearted commentaries with a girlfriend on display. However, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) theorizes that the power of hegemonic masculinity is its ability to morph

under different conditions and subsume other kinds of masculinities to express itself. Bijan's profile tour demonstrated a variety of these hegemonic maneuvers.

The most pervasive of these maneuvers was irony, a form of rhetoric highly adaptive for social networking sites. For example, Bijan used his profile to showcase his nearly naked physical body and receive validations from women that he is "sexy." Identifying irony as a hegemonic maneuver in these sexy self-presentations is important because, whereas Siibak (2010) concludes that male self-objectification on social networking sites evidences a cultural shift in ideals of masculinity, the current case study shows that these new masculine ideals employ irony to maintain power and superiority over homosexuality and femininity. Similar to how men's magazines promote "metrosexuality" while promoting power and control over women (Benwell, 2002; Ricciardelli et al., 2010), irony and parody were effective tools via which Bijan could display himself in sexualized ways while maintaining distance from a position of vulnerability and exploitation.

Central to this maneuvering is consensus building. Friends on Bijan's network supplied virtual applause and added witty remarks that legitimized his hegemonic maneuverings and the masculine ideals they promoted. For example, the tongue-in-cheek responses from friends on Bijan's profile ensured that Bijan's visual self-promotion should not be taken too seriously, thereby distinguishing Bijan from the feminine preoccupation with physical allure. Certainly, hegemonic masculinity is a social process by which masculinity is positioned in relation to others, particularly women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). This process on social networking sites has a potentially broader range of influence because as social actors interact publicly online, their digital symbols resonate for longer periods and are accessible to larger audiences than do fleeting interactions.

Expectation of an audience is a critical component to maintaining hegemonic masculinity on social networking sites. The profile tour demonstrated how entertainment, humor, clever banter, and sexualized bodies are hot commodities, as they are avenues for attracting coveted attention from audiences of friends. A heightened value for attention to the self among the millennial generation using social networking sites is a critical lens for understanding constructions of sexuality and power. Young men may seek the psychological rewards of attention through sexual self-objectification on social networking sites, something that has heretofore been the domain of women. There is both power and vulnerability inherent in these public forums, a tension Bijan sought to manage especially in relation to his girlfriend.

In Bijan's navigations of this tension, the case study was able to illustrate multiple positionings of masculinity in one social actor. On the one hand, Bijan engaged in public displays of intimate affection with his girlfriend. On the other hand, a promiscuous sexuality was instantiated in his profile through portrayals of himself as a "swinger," which functioned to maintain power over his girlfriend and bolster the imaginings of a hegemonic masculinity as beholden to no one. Desiring uncommitted sex may be more of a fantasy than actually experienced in men's everyday lives (Epstein et al., 2009), but as it becomes fulfilled in idealistic identity

portrayals online, it is legitimized as a valued trait. Social networking sites are well suited to fantasy because they are “semi-serious,” as Bijan states. One can be the fantasy masculine one has imagined, if just digitally. Imaginings of a freewheeling independence was articulated a number of times on Bijan’s profile to sustain dominance over the feminine, for example, juxtaposing an “accidentally sexual” woman below a renegade male. A case study approach reveals how young men may yield to alternative forms of masculinity, but at the same time continue to maintain dominance by constructing femininity as foils to the fantasy of being unencumbered by social obligations.

Finally, the ongoing themes of hyper-independence and rebellious masculinity are interesting considering Bijan’s cultural background as an Iranian-American. Hanassab (1998) has pointed out how Iranian-American young men embrace the sexual liberation of the US, counting on their female counterparts to preserve traditional cultural ideals of restraint and social obligation. On Bijan’s profile, he idealizes a masculine privilege to exist outside the rules in contrast to young women who are obligated to them. These expressions may reflect his life experiences of privilege granting him the ability to act outside of traditional Iranian customs for social obligation. Additionally, Bijan’s portrayals of power on MySpace could also represent attempts to compensate for his potential lack of power as an ethnic minority in the US. Examining the intersection of race and gender identity among British Muslim adolescent boys, Archer (2001) suggests that ethnic minority men’s desire to control women can be understood in terms of power relations at a structural level, as men of color position themselves in relation to white men. Perhaps similar to Archer’s participants, Bijan seeks to resist the westernization of his girlfriend (who is also Iranian-American) by limiting her power and thus preserving the honor of his ethnic identity in relation to the dominant West. Paradoxically, this happens even as he himself embraces the individualism so highly valued in the US, thereby minimizing differences between his subordinated identity and the identity of the dominant group (see Coston and Kimmel, 2012).

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Note

1. Some identifying information in the profile tour has been altered, without affecting the meaning of the data, in order to protect the identity of the case study participant.

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