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Cybersexism: How gender and sexuality are at play in cyberspace

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Abstract

Cybersexism refers to acts of violence that: 1) occur or linger in cyberspace; 2) are sexist, homophobic (lesbophobic) or sexual in nature; and 3) who reiterates dominant gender norms targeting girls and boys (tarnishing the former's reputation and threatening the latter's masculinity). Data presented stems from the first study on cybersexism in French high schools: 1127 students (ages 12-16) completed survey questionnaire, and 415 students/48 adults from the same schools took part in focus groups or individual interviews on the topic. It draws the portrait of cybersexism as an inherent part of a digital sociability for French youth, whose gendered and sexualized identities are increasingly developed –at least partially – in cyberspace. This chapter focuses on two characteristics of cybersexism. First, it is pervasive since it results from internalized gender expectations. Cybersexism therefore operates constantly and in various degrees of severity (from asking a girl to refrain from posting a picture to major slut-shaming incidents). Second, contrary to popular belief, it rarely comes from an outside abuser, but from the pressure peers constantly exert on each other: to have/maintain an online presence/popularity, and to adhere to gender norms of heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Ultimately, we position cybersexism as a new way of socially controlling each other's expression of gender and sexuality.

Keywords

Cybersexism; gender; gender socialization; heterosexuality; revenge porn

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“You see that all the time on social networks. When a boy posts a picture of his bare chest, girls will obviously comment and say: “You look good”. Boys too. But when a girl posts a picture of herself in a tank top or in a bathing suit, everyone will say: “Look at that slut”. This 15-year-old French girl we had met during focus groups on cybersexism was adamant: girls and boys are not treated the same when it comes to showing off their assets online. While boys and girls are expected to showcase their attractiveness online (whether it be by exposing parts of their body, showing off their fancy clothes or exciting outings), expectations are much harder to reach for girls. “A girl must show more self-respect if she doesn’t want to be considered *damaged goods*”, explains a younger peer.

These teenagers are not the only ones to underscore the difficulties of navigating cyberspace and social conventions that can be hostile to girls or women. In its 2015 report *Cyberviolence against women and girls*, the UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development suggests cyberviolence overwhelmingly targets women and girls because “physical” VAWG [violence against women and girls] and “cyber” VAWG feed into each other” (2015: 7). Data gathered recently on French youth, though not all sex-segregated (Haddon, Livingston & EU Kids Online Network, 2012), shows girls to be both more active Internet users (UNICEF France, 2014) and consistently more likely than boys to report having been victimized online (DEPP, 2014; CEMEA, 2014). All these studies show instances of cyberviolence are massively gendered: not only because they affect boys and girls in different ways, but also because they are sexist, sexual or pornographic in nature (CHA, 2014). Despite these findings, studies have yet to offer real and thorough gender insight on these episodes.

In France as elsewhere, the law has had difficulty distinguishing between initial consent (given or not for the taking of the picture or shooting of the video for private use) and further consent or approbation for its publication. The *Loi pour une République numérique* was enacted in October 2016, after a months-long online consultation. It includes an article of major importance when it comes to condemning instances of revenge porn. Until then, the non-consensual distribution of pictures or videos did not qualify as an invasion of privacy, since the law did not distinguish between taking a picture and distributing it (consenting to have one’s picture taken would equal consenting to having this picture disseminated). Article 33 quater introduced the specific offence of disseminating images of a sexual nature, whether these images were taken by the victim herself and/or taken in a public place (two conditions that had prevented a conviction for invasion of privacy until then). The law also allows for an aggravation of the sentence to 2 years of incarceration and up to 60,000 euros fine when images are of a sexual nature.

Cyberviolence and “face-to-face” violence

The term “cyberviolence” refers to the use of various digital devices – including the mobile phone – in order to insult, harass, humiliate, disseminate rumors, ostracize, or otherwise coerce an individual that cannot defend himself or herself, or that is otherwise dominated (Blaya, 2013). Instances of cyberviolence present at least three characteristics: ease of anonymity, strong dissemination power, and difficulty to control (Blaya, 2015). First, cyberbullies benefit from anonymity. Digital devices allow them to act under the cover of a false identity (pseudonym, identity theft) or anonymously (creation of ghost accounts). This has major impacts on both bullies and bullied. Bullies can feel disinhibited due to their perceived impunity and because they are not directly exposed to the negative effects their actions have on the victims. The bullies’ anonymity increases the victims’ insecurity (they do not know where the next attack will come from, or who/how many people are targeting them) and sense of isolation.

Second, digital devices allow for a strong dissemination power: episodes of cyberviolence can therefore easily and rapidly reach a large number of people in various networks. Whereas

victims of “traditional” (face-to-face) bullying were likely to find a safe haven, either at home or with a trusted group of friends, cyberbullying allows no respite to its victims. They are theoretically vulnerable to violence 24 hours a day, with no guaranteed end in sight. In this context, a sole ill-intentioned message or picture disseminated without consent can generate repetitive and excessive harassment (Benbenishty & Nir, 2015). Third of all, cyber violence or intimidation is difficult to control or to halt. Disembodied, it escapes control from all involved, including authorities and repenting bullies who might wish to put an end to their victims’ torments.

For the past decade, school climate scholars have underscored the fact that cyberviolence had to be understood in relation to face-to-face violence¹, suggesting all these occurrences have to be considered as parts of the same broader dynamics of violence (Blaya, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008/2007). Indeed, surveys have established strong statistical associations between violence occurring face-to-face and in cyberspace, implying that one could follow or precede another (Benbenishty & Nir, 2015; Cross *et al.*, 2009; Gradinger, Strohmeier & Spiel, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008/2007; Li, 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West & Leaf, 2007). Youth involved in cyberviolence, whether as bullies or victims, are often the same that are implicated in everyday life episodes of violence or harassment, cyberspace allowing for the initial push or relaying incidents that have occurred in school, for example (Blaya, 2015). Being cyberbullied therefore increases the risk of being bullied offline as well, as is the opposite (Blaya, 2015; Benbenishty & Nir, 2015; Juvonen & Gross, 2008). Of course, being victimized in both spaces increases a victim’s level of distress (Benbenishty & Nir, 2015).

All in all, cyberviolence are to be understood as “close vicinity” instances of violence proceeding back and forth between various spaces where they can further disseminate or change forms (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Cyberspace is not a separate, isolated and clearly delineated space. Social relationships and episodes of violence transit between cyberspace and social “face-to-face” spaces, suggesting that cyberspace ought to be considered as a magnified version of face-to-face interactions. In this sense, it is worth reminding that a majority of episodes of cyberviolence involve peers, not ill-intentioned strangers (*stranger danger*) (Blaya, 2015; Ringrose, 2010). Plus, cyberspace and face-to-face interactions even ill intentioned ones should be simultaneous. Thus bullies, targets and witnesses are trapped in a thick grid of unhealthy and invisible communications.

Youth’s gender and heterosexual socialization

To understand gender interactions between peers in cyberspace, one must consider the broader state of power relationships among peers, both online and offline. Indeed, the possibility to stigmatize girls’ images only makes sense in that it stands on the transcultural and historical supposition to the effect that girls’ bodies are intended for boys’ and men’s private consumption (Ringrose & Renold, 2014). It is therefore imperative that we study how dominant norms relating to gender, gender expression and sexual orientation (heterosexuality) play out for youth – first in face-to-face interactions between teenagers, then in cyberspace – but also how digital devices can enhance, decrease or modify the scrutiny under which youth are expected to conform to these norms.

Thirty years of gender studies have undoubtedly shown gender relations to be unequal, in part due to the prejudices caused to girls and to women by the double standards applied to feminine

¹ “Face-to-face” violence is often referred to as “in real life” (IRL) violence in the literature. We will not be using this expression, since youth do not experience online and offline events as occurring separately. Similarly, they do not consider events occurring online as any less “real” than other types of events.

sexuality and female bodies. Despite successive women's movements during the 20th century, an essentialist approach to women and men (and to their bodies and sexualities) continues to dominate. This approach fosters an understanding of the sexes as binary and complementary: it assigns different roles to individuals according to one of two (biological) sexes. These social roles and expectations are heteronormative, inasmuch as they encourage a strict correspondence between biological sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual attraction to individuals from the "other" sex (in a binary system) (Dayer, 2014).

Teenagers question and affirm their gender and sexual identities in relation to the norms that establish the "normal" behaviors – the behaviors that are expected, seen as socially adequate or desirable – for girls and boys (Payne & Smith, 2015). Girls are expected to care for their appearance and to want to be seen as attractive by boys and men (Renold, 2006/2000), but also to be calm, careful and kind. Boys construct their masculinity through standards of toughness (physical and emotional) and risk-taking, and also gain from showing they have access to girls' intimacies – and bodies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Renold, 2000; Connolly, 1995).

To different degrees, youth tend to value these gender norms and act to reinforce them among their peers, going as far as to sanction those who are seen as deviating from the gendered expectations. These sanctions are gender-based: they disproportionately target youth who are seen as the most removed from idealized forms of masculinity or femininity. It is notably the case for youth questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity, identifying as LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex), or being perceived as such by their peers. They are seen as not conforming to gender and heterosexual expectations, or conforming to them ambiguously. It is also the case for girls who show *too much* interest in boys/men or in sexuality (they are consequently called "sluts" or "bitches"), or who are seen as *too* aggressive. Inversely, boys who are seen as lacking desired toughness are called "gays" or "faggots" (Pascoe, 2011; Payne, 2010; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Considered atypical, these youths are often exposed to mean jokes or to disgust, put aside by their peers, or the targets of violence. All in all, they tend to have limited access to power and popularity (Payne, 2007; Pascoe, 2003).

In order to conform to their gender role, girls and boys must adequately perform heterosexuality – and this performance plays out differently according to gender. Since their early teenage years, girls must have an attractive body, be considered desirable by boys/men, be involved in heterosexual rumors or in a heterosexual relationship. The aim is to produce a female body that is considered heterosexually desirable. One of the main means of legitimization of both femininity and heterosexuality is therefore the position of "girlfriend" (Renold, 2000), one of the only contexts where girls are allowed to show a certain interest towards sexuality. It is worth specifying that girls are often sexually shamed: a girl showing sexual desire or autonomy, or looking for sexual fulfillment is rapidly put back in place by her peers – boys and girls alike – who will call her a "slut" or give her a bad reputation (Clair, 2012/2005). Girls are therefore expected to perform a desirable femininity, through which they have to be desirable but respectable (ie. not be sexually active unless they are "in love") (Renold, 2000). Those who are incapable of taking charge of male heterosexual desire – or who are unwilling to do so – can be targeted by peer violence and called lesbians or frigid (Ringrose & Renold, 2014).

Adhering to dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality plays out differently for boys, who have to give proof of their virility. As mentioned before, access to girls' intimacies and bodies play a major role, in that boys must show their male peers they are sexually (heterosexually) active (or could be if and whenever they chose to). An entire realm of male behaviors contributes in showcasing their interest for girls and women: ranking girls' bodies among peers, showing pictures of so-called conquests, commenting loudly on girls' appearance, making unwanted

sexual advances such as touching girls' bottoms or boobs, etc. In that sense, having a "steady" girlfriend is not necessarily the ideal situation for some young men, in that it prohibits them from engaging in aforementioned male bonding and masculinity-proving behaviors. Expanding this idea both girls and boys consider the possibility for a boy to get multiple girlfriends altogether or consecutively.

Cyberspace, digital devices, gender and sexuality norms

Not unlike what happens in face-to-face interactions, cyberspace – and social networking sites in particular – also participates in reinforcing social capital, allowing for someone to be known and renown (Lin, 1999). Similarly, we can reasonably consider that instances of cyberviolence between peers often come from a quest of a higher social status, or contribute to establish the limits of what is socially considered acceptable or not (Payne & Smith, 2013). This is not specific to cyberspace, but social medias play a significant role in formalizing signs of support or admiration, or of depreciation and exclusion (Balleys, 2017), and in reaffirming allies (Balleys, 2017; Couchot-Schiex, 2017).

Cyberspace is also a vehicle for the transmission of social norms inviting stereotypical performances of femininity and masculinity (Bailey, 2015). The few studies that have offered a gendered analysis of cyberviolence have highlighted the existence of powerful gender and sexual dynamics in the cyber exchanges between teenagers. Sexting practices (ie. sending out sexually explicit text messages or pictures) have been specifically studied since they are cyber-specific. Sexting reinforces stereotypical manifestations of gender. It simultaneously allows for the stigmatization of teenage girls that send out sexy pictures of themselves or talk openly about sexuality, while offering teenage boys new possibilities to increase their social capital by showing off their access to the intimacy (and the bodies) of girls (Ringrose & *al.*, 2013; Ringrose & *al.*, 2012). "Dedipix" offer another example of this. This practice – thought to have originated from France (Cosgrove, 2009) – consists of girls sending out pictures of a part of their body (with various sexual connotations) on which they have written a boy's name. In this case, both boys and girls are looking to increase their popularity: boys by showing they can accumulate such pictures (Ringrose *et al.*, 2013), girls by sparking positive comments on their bodies on social networks (showing – to some extent only – desirable femininity). When such pictures are widely disseminated, though, it is only to the advantage of boys (whose popularity grows along with dissemination), while girls are generally condemned for having sent these pictures in the first place (and even if they were never intended for wide dissemination) (Dobson & Ringrose, 2015, Couchot-Schiex, 2017).

Along with the relative impunity that characterizes boys' involvement in the dissemination of intimate pictures of girls without their consent, we should also consider the pressure exerted on girls, whether directly or indirectly, for taking or sharing these pictures in the first place. The question of consent is two-fold and concerns: first, the taking of pictures/videos intended for private or intimate use; second, the dissemination of these pictures/videos. Consent can be given at neither, either or both of these moments, with different implications. Recent history has shown such intimate pictures or videos can be used for revenge purposes (revenge porn), as threats, or as material in prevision of eventual attacks by this person; French teenagers call such material "files". These pictures can therefore not be isolated from the gender system previously described. Actual practices must be analyzed, especially since knowing the possible risks does not prevent youth from engaging in these types of behaviors.

While digital devices have been shown to amplify existing gender dynamics, there is also evidence to show that they can facilitate interactions questioning this very social order (DEPP, 2014). Cyberspace can allow girls to experiment other social positions where they more freely

transgress female codes around femininity and sexuality (Frith, 2012; Crowley, 2010), find community and like-minded peers, or engage in sexually-charged interactions (Rice & Watson, 2016) – while steering clear of these gender explorations in face-to-face interactions. Similarly, boys can choose to initiate romantic relationships out of the policing gaze of their peers (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997) or get involved against sexism (Kelly, Pomerantz & Currie, 2006) – actions that would be costlier to undertake in *real* life. What is tolerated (and therefore possible) in cyberspace would not necessarily be conceivable in face-to-face interactions, where adults and peers would perhaps more promptly condemn such behaviors threatening the gender order.

Methodology

Data presented stems from the first study on cybersexism in France (2015-2016). The aim of this study was to forge a better understanding of the episodes of cyberviolence that are based on gender or on sexuality, or in other words, that are sexual, sexist or homophobic in nature at school. This study was conducted in two parts. In the first part, 1127 students (12 to 16-year-olds) from 12 high schools around the Île-de-France region completed a survey questionnaire on episodes of gender violence they might have taken part in (either as bully or as victim) or witnessed, both in their school environment and in cyberspace. For the second part of the study, the research team conducted 34 focus groups with 403 students from the same schools. The focus groups were organized during a class period. Students from the same class were split up into two groups of 10-12 students, sometimes along gender lines, sometimes not. The objective was to create a climate where all students were most likely to participate. Similarly, 12 students that wanted to discuss a matter privately with a researcher chose to partake in an individual interview. Finally, 48 interviews were conducted with school staff, including teachers, counsellors, administrators and nurses.

To circumvent existing power dynamics and establish grounds for discussion that did not directly involve any of the students, we presented them with a scenario. It read as follows: “Manon takes a picture of herself in order to look seductive. She sends it to friends she trusts. The picture is then leaked to social networks and sent out to students’ cell phones. She receives many comments.” We then asked the students what they thought about this type of situation. In most focus groups, they were quick to respond and to condemn Manon for showcasing her body in such a “provocative” manner. We asked them if their reactions would be similar if this scenario was to involve a boy – to which they overwhelmingly answered that it would not. This then set the stage to discussing gender norms and how they would differently affect girls and boys.

Revenge porn, or the unfolding of a cybersexist event

In order to see how an episode of cybersexism can progressively come to “unfold”, we will reconstitute a specific episode that happened to 13-year-old girl Livia (pseudonym), who had requested to meet for an individual interview. Livia proceeded to tell us about events that happened to her the previous year. She had fallen in love with a boy her age and they had been dating for 7 months when these events took place.

- We were talking on the phone, and I told him I was about to get in the shower. He said: “Cool. Would you take a picture for me?” Of course, I knew that he was a boy, and that he wanted to see girls. I’m not stupid. I said: “I don’t really want to”. He told me: “When I ask for pictures, girls always send them to me”. And he started to insult me. “You’re a slut”, things like that.

INT: And what did you think when he said that to you?

- I’m not naïve, but I thought: “I trust him. I will send him just one, and it will make him happy”. I didn’t think there were any risks.

INT: You then took a picture?

- Yes. I had positioned my hand in order to hide my body. And I sent the picture. When I called him back, he said: "Good. So now, whenever you're a bitch to me, I know what I can do with it".

In a few sentences, Livia recalls two of the three "trigger" elements that will constitute an episode of revenge porn. First, she is pressured to send an intimate picture against her will – or *gut feeling*. Her boyfriend exerts pressure on her by telling her she lacked in comparison to other girls and by insulting her. She is forced to send the picture even though she had verbalised not consenting to it. The second trigger happens a few minutes after she sends the picture, when her boyfriend tells her he intends to keep the picture "in case she's ever a bitch to him". In other words, what was initially intended for a private use between them becomes a "dossier" (literally, "folder" or *revenge file*) on Livia, meaning a tool through which he can apply pressure and control her.

- That day [a few weeks later], we had a stupid argument, and he posted the picture on Facebook. Everyone at school saw it. Students threatened to send it to my parents. (...) Anywhere I walked, people stared at me. People teased me: "So, Livia, you like taking pictures of yourself?". I was called a slut. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?", I was told.

The third trigger, leading to the public dissemination of the picture, is an argument she has with her boyfriend that leads him to put the picture up on Facebook. The picture consequently moves from private use to public use – initially cyberspace, but then contaminates the school environment. The impacts are immediate, massive and violent.

Girls would call me names, talk behind my back. I really felt uneasy. There was this girl who was supposed to be my best friend. She took advantage of the situation. She laughed at me and also sent out the photo. It was my worst year.

As mentioned earlier, this study had us conduct focus groups and interviews with numerous individuals in the same schools. We were therefore able to weigh the manner in which what happened to Livia resonated and impacted her peers. Students from her grade (4th grade in France, the equivalent of 8th grade in the American school system) and from other grades mentioned her case during the focus groups.

- Tracy: It happened here. A girl had sent out a picture of her body. Everyone sent it around because they felt she shouldn't have shown herself. Nobody talked to her after that.

- Vina: Everyone at school was talking about that picture.

- Tracy: And called her names. "You're 12 and you show your body, ugly bitch?"

(14-year-olds, 4th grade France/8th grade USA)

- Even kids who haven't seen her picture have heard about it, that's for sure.

- INT: Students from other classes too?

- Madam, students from other cities knew about it.

(Najet, 15 years-old, 3rd grade France/9th grade USA)

Livia's victimisation comes to an end when her mother hears about the events months later. Alongside her daughter, she decides to contact the school's administration and press charges with the police. This resolution is somehow atypical, since youths often refrain from referring to adults to mitigate episodes of cyberviolence, suggesting they won't understand or they might react by prohibiting the use of their digital devices. This avoidance of adults is especially true for episodes of cybersexism, since they showcase youths' desires and sexuality which are thought likelier to be morally policed.

The Livia episode allows us to see what can trigger an episode of cybersexism, and how it can come to be known throughout an entire school, via expanding circles. As was the case for the vast majority of the events mentioned in the focus groups, it occurred in her daily environment, with people she initially trusted (her boyfriend, her best friend, her classmates, etc.). It is this very proximity between bullies, targets and witnesses that explains the damage caused by such episodes, who tarnish girls' reputations and who are not easily forgotten. During the interview, more than a year after the events, Livia is often reminded of them by her schoolmates, although "now everybody knows about this picture".

Being the right gendered cyber version of oneself

The sexuality-based harassment of girls is not exceptional. Every school that took part in our study reported at least one such event – and often, much more. However, though brutal, these episodes are not the only way gender norms and expectations are disseminated in cyberspace. Most of these lessons are learned through what could be called acts of micro-violence (Debarbieux, Blaya & Vidal, 2003), referring to minor acts of civilities or of symbolic violence. These constitutes ways for youths to learn the rules guiding cyber behaviors, from the type of profile picture that is acceptable to the nature of the comments you are allowed to leave, etc. These rules are – we shall see – highly gendered.

What do these students pursue online? The goals are an increase in popularity or in social capital (Couchot-Schiex, 2017), but we were told the means to achieve these goals vary according to gender. Consider the following excerpts from focus groups.

Some girls will do anything just to have more "likes". They show off their shape. They take pictures from behind or from the side to show the size of their asses, or they show off their cleavage. All that just to have the most "likes" possible.

- Sherazade, 15 years-old, 3rd grade France/9th grade USA)

- Brenda: [Boys] just want to show: "Look, girls are sending me pictures! Girls like me!".

- Jade: I think it amuses them. They think they have something to gain by doing that.

- Juana: They want to show that girls are interested in them.

- INT: That they are popular, is that it?

- Jade: Yes, that they can have any girl they want.

(13-year-olds, 5th grade France/7th grade USA)

- Sarah: A girl that takes a picture in a bikini deserves to be called out on it. She's being vulgar.

- INT: What makes it vulgar?

- Miguel: It depends on the bikini.
 - Sarah: It depends on where she is. At the beach, it may be okay. But at home, it means she showed herself on purpose.
 - Marie-Ève: But she can't remove her bra strap.
 - Estelle: A boy can't really be vulgar. He can never show too much of his body.
 - Carla: Yes. Girls have to protect themselves.
- (15-year-olds, 3rd grade France/9th grade USA)

In these excerpts, students suggest that a type of behavior – namely, showing a bit of skin – might be perceived as problematic (“vulgar”) for girls, but not for boys (who “can never show too much of [their] body”), though they pursue similar objectives (being considered heterosexually attractive by their peers). Girls have to preserve their reputation. They are expected to produce proofs of their femininity (via bodily attributes, clothes, make-up) in order to be deemed desirable by their male peers. But they must do so while maintaining their reputation: by preserving an appearance of purity and innocence. Cyberspace is another place where they can fail to do so. Here are a few examples, evoked during the focus groups, of ways girls can acquire a bad cyber-reputation: if they take or send out a picture/video of themselves that is deemed “inappropriate”, if they have such a picture/video taken or sent out by someone else (with or without their consent), if they show too much interest in boys or in sexuality, etc. A girl can also have her reputation tarnished by association, for example if she doesn't explicitly condemn her girlfriend's taking of such a picture.

Rules appear to differ for boys. Boys who appear to be the most popular with their peers are those who are considered “man” enough, or “heterosexual” enough. This can be done during peer interactions, offline or online. Cyberspace however offers additional ways to provide these proofs: have a lot of girls “like” one's picture, or comment positively on one's appearance. Another common example that came up in the focus groups is the possibility to hold the proof of having been intimate with a girl, in order to prove it to others. If the fear of being called sluts keeps most girls in check, boys have to steer clear of not looking or acting “masculine enough”. This can play out during face-to-face interactions and in cyberspace.

- Youssef: When boys touch each other's butts, there are rules. There are things we can't do.
 - INT: What are these things?
 - Saïd: He can't cry.
 - Youssef: You can't touch private parts, like the penis.
 - Saïd: You have to laugh. When you touch your friend's butt, it's supposed to be funny.
 - Youssef: And you can't pinch the butt either.
 - INT: Pinching is not allowed?
 - Youssef: No. Otherwise it becomes a faggot thing.
- (15-year-olds, 3rd grade France/9th grade USA)

- Adel: On Facebook or Snapchat, a boy can show his abs and his chest, and not be called names. But if he acts in a weird way, if he lowers his t-shirt on his shoulder, he will be told he's weird.
 - Many students: He's mentally ill! He's gay!
- (14-year-olds, 4th grade France/8th grade USA)

Both of these examples show the social rules that boys are expected to comply with in their daily interactions. In the first example, the physical proximity between boys is only made possible by everyone's compliance to the following rules: everyone has to have a good time, and physical touch cannot be too intimate (i.e. involve genitals or grabbing that would be considered too intense). In the second example, students try to spell out the difference between a gender-adequate way a boy can show his body (i.e. by showing off his musculature), and a way that students seem to consider inappropriate – or perhaps too feminine (i.e. by lowering his t-shirt). In both scenarios, students conflate non-masculinity and femininity, or gayness, or mental illness. With this association, they explicitly condemn the behaviors they consider to be out of the realm of the socially acceptable for boys (i.e. wanting to touch a peer's penis or to pinch a peer's butt, wanting to show their cleavage, etc.).

For girls and for boys, therefore, the demonstration of one's heterosexuality appears central in this quest to prove adequate masculinity and femininity. Girls have to preserve an equilibrium between presenting themselves as objects of sexual desire for boys and men (therefore performing expected heterosexuality) and protecting their reputation from being negatively tainted from these interactions (i.e. therefore performing adequate femininity). Boys also must navigate between proving their heterosexual desire (by being loud about their interests towards girls and women, by showing they are sexually active or can be) and steering clear of what could be perceived as sexual interest towards other boys. This very strict performance conflating heterosexuality and femininity/masculinity renders it difficult, if not impossible, for youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer, who are trans, intersex or non-binary, or who question their sexual orientation or gender identity, to enter the equation. These youths are excluded from the very possibility to play – and to perform – in this social game of identity construction and peer interactions.

Gender and sexualities at play in cyberspace

Cyberspace is another place where teenagers can and have to prove they are the “right” gendered version of themselves. They are expected to conform to feminine and masculine hegemonic standards while performing heterosexuality. This necessitates them to exert a rigorous control on their online image, a control hardly compatible with the characteristics of cyberspace. Girls have to be disproportionately vigilant towards their online image, and are pressured to maintain both heterosexual desire and perception of innocence. When they fail at maintaining this precarious equilibrium, they are doubly blamed: they are slut-shamed for having showed off parts of their bodies in the first place, and they are condemned for being naïve enough not to think an intimate picture of them would be shared among their peers.

These social mechanisms where girls (and sometimes boys) are put back in their gendered place are part of a phenomenon we call cybersexism. It refers to acts that are directly or indirectly violent towards individuals, that unfold over cyberspace and face-to-face interactions, and that aim at reiterating gender norms. These episodes result from internalized expectations regarding gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Cybersexism operates constantly and manifests itself in various degrees of severity – from commenting friends' profile pictures to showing photos of sexual conquests (real or desired) to major revenge porn incidents. Contrary to popular belief, this pressure is not suddenly triggered by an outside abuser, but arises from the pressure peers constantly exert on each other: to have and to maintain an online popularity, and to adhere to gender norms of heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Ultimately, cybersexism can be understood as a new way of socially controlling each other's expression of gender and sexuality.

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