

#TheFappening: Virtual Manhood Acts in (Homo)Social Media

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**ABSTRACT**

Using an interactionist framework, we analyze publicly available data from Twitter to track real-time reactions to the widely publicized celebrity nude photo hacking of 2014 (“The Fappening”). We ask: “Related to The Fappening, what manhood acts are employed in virtual social space?” Using search terms for “fappening” or “#thefappening”, we collected 100 tweets per hour from August 31 to October 1, 2014 (Average: 1700/day). Coding and qualitative analyses of a sub-sample of tweets (N=9750) reveal four virtual manhood acts commonly employed to claim elevated status in the heterosexist hierarchy and reproduce gendered inequality. These acts include: 1) creation of homosocial, heterosexist space 2) sexualization of women 3) signaling possession of a heterosexual, male body and 4) humor as a tool of oppression. This article introduces the concept of “virtual manhood acts” and contributes to growing understandings of the reproduction of manhood and the oppression of women in online social spaces.

## INTRODUCTION

On August 31, 2014 a flood of nude photos emerged from the dimly lit corners of the Internet. These photos had two things in common: 1) they were stolen from private, password-protected accounts and personal devices and 2) with rare exception, they were images of white, heterosexual, female celebrities. Over 100 individuals including actors, models and athletes - many with A-list name recognition - were targeted (Buchanan 2014). Within hours, the photo leak was dubbed “The Fappening,” a combination of “fapping” (slang term for male masturbation) and “The Happening.”

Though originally posted on the online message board 4chan, the photos quickly spread to countless other websites. On Twitter, an online social networking service that allows participants to read and post 140-character “tweets,” reaction was swift and mostly enthusiastic. One user wrote, “This is the greatest day of the internet.” Others declared The Fappening an historical event: “August 31st 2014, or as it will be known in the history books, The Fappening.” Many made their specific interest in the photos unambiguous (e.g., “Eat, sleep, fap repeat #thefappening”). With a rapidity only possible in the Internet Age, Twitter became clogged with Fappening-related jokes, commentary and memes. The common denominator among Fappening fans? Their use of manhood acts to signal a masculine persona.

While some see The Fappening as an iCloud security breach with a juvenile name, we argue that it is a timely case study in modern manhood acts. This article contributes to our understanding of the homosocial reproduction of manhood, and its linkages to the oppression of women. While important research has examined ways men signal a masculine self through face-to-face interactions (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Eastman 2011; Ezzell 2012; Kehily and Nayak 1997), our work analyzes interactions that occur online and are typically faceless. As we

demonstrate, individuals modify in-person manhood acts to convey masculine personas (MPs) via *virtual manhood acts*. We assert that these symbolic selves are intimately linked to patriarchal hierarchies of power (Connell 2005; Johnson 2014).

Using an interactionist perspective (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969), we analyze publicly available data from Twitter to track real-time reactions from individuals participating in or commenting on The Fappening. Broadly speaking, these data provide insights into an array of gendered norms. However, the interactionist framework enables us to hone in on how manhood acts – like all facets of gender - are performative cues intended to convey a particular definition of self. Unlike all gender performance, however, manhood acts oppress women and thus “do” dominance (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Schwalbe 2014). In addition to expanding the literature on men and masculinity(ies), our data contribute to emergent understandings of manhood acts performed in virtual social spaces. We ask: “Related to The Fappening, what manhood acts are employed in virtual social space?”

### **MASCULINITY AND MANHOOD ACTS**

Gendered selves are “imagined qualit[ies] of character imputed to individuals based on their expressive behavior” (Schwalbe 2014: 49). “Doing gender” is a dramaturgical achievement (Goffman 1977; West and Zimmerman 1987) that often depends on physical characteristics (diffuse characteristics) or props that are readily observable, but behavioral characteristics are also important cues (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Typically, one does not attempt to prove possession of a male or female body through the display of anatomical features. Rather, one “acts like a man” or “acts like a woman” via pre-set social scripts (Kivel 1984). Because we live in patriarchy, the configuration of practice understood as “masculinity” offers the preferred and more powerful gendered script (Johnson 2014).

Masculinity does not exist in a singular form and has multiple definitions (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messner 2001; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987). Previous definitions, wherein masculinity is any action performed by a male body, are too broad to be meaningful (Ezzell 2016). Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) have called for scholars to shift their analytic focus from masculinity to manhood acts. Manhood acts are cultural practices or individual actions – performed by men - that signify a masculine self, distinguish males from females, signal control, and *advantage men at the expense of women* (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, 278). Manhood acts align with the interactionist understanding of gender as action, not an inherent characteristic of individuals (Ezzell 2016; West and Zimmerman 1987). These acts may be carried out individually but, since it is men who control the status of other men, they are typically homosocial and collaborative in nature (Flood 2008).

Utilizing this configuration of practices ensures the superiority of men within the gender order and allows men to strive for manhood status, a subjective yet desirable social value (Schwalbe 2014, 31). Analyzing manhood acts addresses the “Why should we care?” question of gendered practice generally and masculine practice in particular. Manhood acts deserve greater scrutiny not just for the way they imbue *difference* but for the ways they create *inequality* (Ezzell 2016; Johnson 2014; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Men may signal a masculine self via a variety of strategies including aggression, emotional control, and reification of sexist and heterosexist ideals (Kivel 1984; Pascoe 2007). These actions take on additional significance for men who do not meet hegemonic ideals (e.g., minority, gay, poor, etc.). Marginalized men leverage these actions as “compensatory” manhood acts (see: Eastman 2011; Ezzell 2012; Sumerau 2012).

A commonality of previously studied manhood acts is their *embodied nature*. For instance, young boys learn that both the physical act of fighting and suppression of emotional reaction to injury are demonstrations of masculine selves (Morris 2012). In Southern male “rebel” culture, manhood acts are embodied by an explosive mixture of drunkenness and violent aggression (Eastman 2011). Men who are impeded from physical violence may signal their willingness to fight via verbal aggression and confrontation (Ezzell 2012). Connell (2005) speaks of the body as a site around which various masculine tensions are managed. In this view, the body is not only an object of, but also an agent in, the creation of the social structures responsible for the definitions, categorizations, and expectations that we place on them. He calls this recursive pattern “body-reflexive practices.”

Body-reflexive practices are the avenues through which the body becomes a participant in social interaction as it generates and shapes “courses of social conduct” (Connell 2005, 60). For example, the classic insult, “You throw like a girl,” includes not only symbolic gender stereotypes but also a concrete observation of a real body and an evaluation of how the body should move in association with these stereotypes. Gender is vulnerable when bodily performance cannot be sustained. In online social spaces, the body is absent and the recursive loop is broken. Thus, it is necessary to construct a virtual reflexive site and attempt to make the body “visible” online (Boero and Pascoe 2012). Although we might expect references to the body to be at once more prevalent and explicit in online masculine performances, data on manhood acts in virtual space are relatively rare (for exceptions see: Garcia-Favaro and Gill 2016; Jane 2014; Massarani 2015).

To address this literature gap, we ask: Related to The Fappening, what manhood acts are employed in virtual social space? We identify four virtual manhood acts commonly employed to

signify elevated membership in the heterosexist hierarchy. These acts include: 1) creation of homosocial, heterosexist space 2) sexualization of women 3) signaling possession of a heterosexual, male body and 4) humor as a tool of oppression. From a strictly interactionist perspective, all actors engaging in manhood acts are “men” and all masculine selves are essentially virtual (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). However, online actors may find it easier to convincingly “be a man” and claim the benefits of this status within the liminal space of online interactions. Thus we introduce the term masculine persona (MP) to underscore the performative nature of this gender-identity claim in the specific context of online social spaces.

We also emphasize that manhood acts performed by MPs are intimately linked with the reproduction of gender inequality. For instance, the creation of homosocial, heterosexist space – wherein men perform manhood acts for the gaze of other men - serves to reproduce “structures of inequality *within* as well as *across* the socially constructed gender divide between men and women” (Grazian 2007, 224). Sexualization strips women of any worth beyond sexual desirability, and is thus also used as a means for men to (re-) assert their dominance, heterosexual power and/or sexual competence (Flood 2008; Grazian 2007). Male bodies generally, and heterosexual male bodies in particular, are socially structured as normative and dominant (Johnson 2014; Pascoe 2007). Laying claim to such a body – even if it cannot be visually confirmed – signals power and control. Finally, while humor has many functions in interpersonal interactions, it may be used in gendered interactions to subordinate others or reify existing social stratification (Martineau 1972).

### **GENDER, VIRTUAL SPACES, AND POWER**

Living in patriarchy means that women in “real-life” are routinely dismissed, silenced, harassed, threatened, beaten, raped and murdered (Johnson 2014). Virtual social spaces, in theory,

encourage more egalitarian and less gendered interactions (Bartlett et al. 2014). But a growing body of research finds that gendered power differentials are not merely replicated online, they are magnified (Henry and Powell 2015; Filipovic 2007; Shaw 2014). Anonymity and the real or perceived lack of consequences – “the online disinhibition effect” – (Suler in Thompson 2016) appears to fuel virtual gendered violence (Massarani 2015; Penny 2013). Misogyny and violence range from subtle (sexting) to overt (online threats of rape or murder directed at women perceived as “feminist”) (Garcia-Favoro and Gill 2016; Jane 2014).

On Twitter, misogyny is alive and well, even if limited to 140 characters or less (Cole 2015). One study found that between December 2013 and February 2014, about 2.7 million English-language tweets used the word “rape”; over six million tweets used the words “slut” or “whore” (Bartlett et al. 2014). More than half the time these tweets were misogynistic, abusive, or related to pornography (Bartlett et al. 2014). In an effort to push back against this misogyny, gender-relevant hashtags have emerged, and are often used to expose gendered violence or create a space for solidarity (Berridge and Portwood-Stacer 2015; Eagle 2015; Rentschler 2015). Still, “gendertrolling” – the use of specific, and often explicit, gender-based insults and threats– is prevalent (Mantilla 2013).

While it is tempting to target technology as a source of misogyny, we assert that technology is merely an enabling tool. To understand online misogyny is to shed light on deeply embedded gendered norms and societal power dynamics. To that end, we begin the process of analyzing virtual manhood acts that systematically disempower women and reify the hegemony of men (Hearn 2004).

This paper answers Schrock and Schwalbe’s (2009) call to document and examine “how males use the interaction order collaboratively to construct manhood acts, how they police and

support each other's acts, and how they create and share the material and symbolic resources that enable various kinds of manhood acts" (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009, 289-90). In the following pages we demonstrate that a variety of manhood acts are employed to maintain the heterosexist hierarchy. Although Twitter may be anonymous in nature, the tweets we highlight use unambiguous textual and visual strategies to signal manhood status.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

Twitter.com is a social media website geared toward communication. Through the website and its various other forms (i.e., mobile apps), Twitter users can create, share, and engage in discussion 140 characters at a time using text, pictures, and web links. An estimated 23% of all online adults, and 20% of the entire United States (U.S.) adult population used Twitter in September 2014, the time frame of our analyses. Of internet users in the U.S., approximately 25% of men and 21% of women interact with Twitter. About 20%, 28%, and 28% of internet users who are White-Non-Hispanic, Black-Non-Hispanic, and Hispanic, respectively, use Twitter. The majority of Twitter users are 18 to 49 years of age, and live in urban or suburban areas. Of Twitter users, 38% report using Twitter daily, 21% weekly, and 44% less often than weekly. In comparison, 71% of Facebook users reported engaging with Facebook daily (Duggan 2015).

As an online social space, Twitter possesses its own culture including its own language conventions (Zhang et al. 2011). Examples include: "tweet" (a block of text no longer than 140 characters), "RT" (indicating that a user has repeated or "retweeted" a previous tweet), and; "#" ("hashtag") used to organize tweets according to topics (e.g., #fappening). Additionally, symbols called "emoticons" or "emojis" are frequently used to convey feelings or emotions.



Using Twitter provides a unique opportunity to engage in textual ways of knowing that is highly dependent on the constantly shifting stream of 24-hour media and access to shared digital knowledge. Sociologically it provides a useful, if currently underutilized, tool in capturing public opinion on current events as it occurs in “real-time.” Using Twitter for research also avoids a host of problems that plague traditional social science research including recruitment, social acceptability bias, and recall bias (Miller and Duffy 2014). Tweets are digitally archived by the United States Library of Congress and widely considered to be a publicly available data source (Zimmer and Proferes 2014). Additionally, passive information gathering, or data mining, involves no interaction or intervention with individuals. Our university Institutional Review Board waived the approval requirement.

We identified The Fapping as an event that could provide a rich data set of gendered performance in virtual space. Using search terms for “fapping” or “#thefapping”, we collected tweet data from Topsy.com, a web service that archives all tweets since 2006. We analyzed data over a thirty day period from 12am August 31, 2014 to 12am October 1, 2014 using automated web scraping techniques. Web scraping (web harvesting or web data extraction) is the process of implementing software to examine a webpage and catalog data. We employed Web Scraper, an extension for Google’s Chrome browser. The scraper software deciphers cues from the user to pinpoint locations in the source code from which to extract text and catalog the selection in a database file.

We attempted to collect 100 tweets per hour for our target period; in some instances, 100 unique tweets were not present. In this case, all tweets during that hour were included in our study population. In other instances, the 100 tweets represents a sample of all existing tweets. Although there was potential to collect 2400 tweets per day, we averaged approximately 1700

tweets each day, with a maximum of 2400 and a minimum of 592. For a graphic representation of tweet trends related to our search terms, please see Figure 1.

[Figure 1 About Here.]

Based on trends represented in Figure 1, we chose to analyze a sub-sample of fifteen days within the month. We analyzed fifty percent of the tweets from the day of the leak, August 31, and September 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 14, 21, 22, 23, 26, and 30 (N=9750). The first author reviewed preliminary data from August 31 and September 7 to construct a first-pass code list. Both authors then fully coded a sub-sample of days (August 31, September 7 and September 14) for the purposes of code reconciliation, as well as to generate and reconcile emergent codes. A total of ninety-two codes were created, and the authors used this full code list to code the days selected for this analysis.

To aid in coding, memo-writing and analysis, we used NVivo 10 (2012) software. NVivo allowed us to create and utilize a mixture of researcher designated codes (e.g., codes linked to the sexualization definition) as well as code “in-vivo” wherein codes are created directly from the text. We shared coding and produced reports that illuminated complex thematic connections.

In addition to coding tweet text, we also followed many of the links embedded in tweets and coded those containing Fappening-related content. Some links appeared to be piggybacking off the popularity of #thefappening, and used the hashtag as clickbait to sell products or pornography. The content of these links was not directly Fappening-related and in an effort to focus our analytic efforts, we did not follow these links.

Analyses were informed by grounded theory, and we used a multi-stage coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1998) that is both deductive and inductive. This method allowed us to focus our analytic gaze on gender performance while still remaining open to tangential and emergent

themes (Charmaz 2014). Of the 92 codes that emerged, most related to the performance of manhood. In the following pages we explicate the four most commonly utilized manhood acts and use specific tweet examples to connect individual sentiments to the large-scale creation of a heterosexist, homosocial virtual space. Our qualitative findings are not intended to be generalizable to the population at large; but these data do not need to be statistically generalizable for us to draw inferences about gendered inequality and its reproduction in online social spaces (Charmaz 2014).

### **VIRTUAL MANHOOD ACTS**

We analyze how individuals signaled a masculine personas (MP) as they commented on or participated in The Fappening, signifying masculine selves without benefit of the most obvious marker of manhood – a physical body. Rather than provide numerous example quotes, we present excerpts that exemplify common strategies intended to lay claim to manhood status. Interactions within this online social space were structured to welcome “real men” and leave women or gay men feeling rejected or uncomfortable. MPs also signaled their masculine selves through tweets connoting a heterosexual male body; explicitly carnal imagery and words were frequently utilized. To emphasize their sexual potency and distance themselves from the feminine, MPs sexualized The Fappening victims and other women. Finally, humor was used to trivialize the degradation and exploitation of women. Viewed separately, each act signals a claim to manhood status, and the accompanying power and privileges. Taken together, these virtual acts affirmed privileges of manhood while oppressing and debasing women.

#### **Creating A Homosocial, Heterosexist Space**

Masculine personas (MPs) signified that The Fappening was a celebratory event controlled by and created for heterosexual men. A successful homosocial space conforms to gendered

performance expectations. Participants must avoid any hint of femininity (i.e. weakness) by adhering to scripts of misogyny and homophobia (Kimmel 2008; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). By keeping girls and gays out, “real” men can successfully police manhood acts, and ensure that dominant ideals about male superiority and female inferiority are preserved. In other words, the creation of a “boys only” space is just as much about keeping women (down and) *out* as it is keeping men *in* (and in line).

In Fappening-related tweets, MPs used hashtags #fappening and #thefappening to signal group identity. Text and images accompanying the hashtag displayed a worldview that was male- and hetero-centric. Much like men and boys in face-to-face interactions (see: Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2007) MPs used gendered language, signaled in-group status, and reacted negatively to the smattering of non-female nudes. Early tweeters shouted from the virtual rooftops, urging all men to check out The Fappening. Male-identifiers including “lads,” “bruh,” and “guy(s)” were commonly employed. Using non-inclusive language helped underscore that The Fappening was created for, and intended to benefit, only heterosexual men. Gendered language served as the virtual equivalent of a “Boys Only!” sign on a teenager’s door.

One participant wrote: “If you're a guy, Google The Fappening RIGHT NOW. You're welcome.” Proclaimed another: “Fellow guys!!! Check it out! The fappening is happening! Enjoy and thank me later! reddit.com/r/TheFappening...”. Said a third: “Lads in case you didn't know. Remember this day. THE FAPPENING 2014.”

The Fappening, moreover, was associated with “real” manhood (“August 31st 2014 a day no red blooded male will ever forget thank god for the internet #TheFappening!”) and posited as a “victory” for men (“The day men won the internet. Never forget 8/31/2014. #TheFappening”). MPs not only reified hegemonic ideals of “real” men, but reminded participants that in patriarchy

men are representative of all people (Johnson 2014). For example: “The fappingen ...still gives me hope in mankind.” Since men are central to patriarchy’s narrative, it follows that “the world” would be “uplifted” by stolen female nudes: “With all the bad news (wars, terrorists), we have to admit that #thefappingen has uplifted the morale of the world #jenniferlawrence.”

Many tweets signaled participation in the viewing and/or collection of hacked photos. We coded these quotes “participation ribbon” to underscore that these proclamations were a form of identity work rooted in virtual interaction. By asserting heterosexual desire for nude female images, these MPs established “a sort of baseline masculinity” (Pascoe 2007, 87). Participation ranged from gawping decrees (“I SAW EVERYTHING #TheFappingen”) to indicating shared experience (“So how many people here still haven't slept. #TheFappingen”). Others demonstrated FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) “Yup, bringing my laptop while reviewing. Can't miss #TheFappingen.”

In order to underscore the homosocial nature of The Fappingen, some MPs name-checked specific friends. Said one: “So @[redacted] sent me a glorious compilation of nudes from #TheFappingen phenomenon. Good job! Hahaha. Aaaand goodnight!” Others offered to share their links: “A good friend has just sent me The Fappingen. Posting the link in the chat in my hitbox.tv/[redacted].” Another wrote simply, “Lemme know if you wanna see those leaked nudes. #thefappingen.”

An unsettling theme that emerged was curating behavior, or “women as collectible objects.” Objectification is key to dominant-subordinate relationships inherent in patriarchy, as it strips women of personhood and creates critical cognitive and emotional distance (Johnson 2014). One MP wrote, “#TheFappingen is the new Pokemon game #Gottacatchemall.” Another wondered: “Anyone else having trouble keeping track of the updates to #TheFappingen? I want

to have a complete set, like Flintstones jelly jars.” Some MPs bragged about their “collections.” For instance, “@[Name Redacted] I have them all now mate #TheFappening.”

MPs also engaged in gendered identity work by loudly rejecting the (very rare) inclusion of male bodies. Justin Verlander, an athlete, was featured in a handful of the hacked nudes though his girlfriend, model Kate Upton, was the clear target. Said one MP: “All I’ve learned from #TheFappening is that Justin Verlander’s dick sucks.” Another complained: “I’m having nightmares about Kate Upton’s Fappening pictures.” Others took the opportunity to make fun of Mr. Verlander. For example, “Saw Verlander on TV. Laughed for 90 seconds. #TheFappening” and “Justin Verlander has just passed Donald Sutherland as the Most Awkward Naked Man On Film Ever.”

MPs also used the “fag discourse” (see: Pascoe 2007) to affirm their heterosexuality. Responding to a tweet suggesting that the hacker should share his nudes, one MP huffed, “Hahaha Jennifer Lawrence on why no dude selfies. Come on the Hacker was a dude. Would be rather gay for him to post male #TheFappening.”<sup>1</sup> *Non-participation* in The Fappening was seen as clear evidence of homosexuality. For instance, “You know you’re gay when you stayed limp during the Fappening.”

In sum, MPs created a homosocial, heterosexist space by broadcasting the events of The Fappening to the public at large, as well as targeted others. The homosocial nature of the event is underscored by the willingness of veteran photo collectors to lend a helping hand to others seeking to secure the pictures. Other MPs received these messages and reproduced them.

Although we acknowledge that Fappening related tweets were not exclusive to MPs, they set the

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<sup>1</sup> Though an assumption at the time, the individuals thus far charged and/or under investigation for The Fappening are men. <http://heavy.com/news/2016/03/ryan-collins-celebgate-fappening-hacker-lancaster-pennsylvania-celebrity-phones-photos-phishing-photos-family-documents/>

tone and enacted strict boundary maintenance of gendered norms. Images of female bodies were curated and objectified while images of male bodies were eschewed, as exemplified by the strong negative sanctions against a single nude male body (Justin Verlander), and utilization of the “fag” discourse. These broadcasting, organizing and excluding behaviors simultaneously increased awareness of the existence of the nude photo leak and set the expectations for the tenor of the conversation. MPs posited this predatory event as a celebration and victory created by, and intended for, heterosexual men only. Regardless of motive (e.g., fear of being left out, excited by the opportunity to participate, etc.) these collective actions and interactions served to create a collaborative, homosocial event that reified and normalized a cyber-sex crime.

### **Signifying Possession of a Heterosexual Male Body**

As noted, a unique feature of this study is the anonymous and disembodied nature of the participants. While it could be argued that these features are a limitation of our dataset, we assert that the *claiming* of a masculine self, done thousands of time post-Fappening, is more interesting and important than whether or not the participant’s sex matches their gender performance. While it’s true that virtual spaces pose obvious challenges to “proving” one’s manhood, MPs found unambiguous ways to signify a masculine self and suggest possession of a heterosexual male body. We assert that the emphasis on the body is no accident and in fact aligns with recent observations that the modern male body is portrayed as significantly larger and more aggressive compared to previous generations (Earp and Katz 1999). Some propose that increased emphasis on male physique is a reaction to the “crisis of masculinity” wherein men are increasingly challenged by women for roles in educational, social and occupational spaces (Earp and Katz 1999; Vaccaro 2011).

Lacking the ability to give off the impression of a male body via diffuse status

characteristics or physical performances, MPs made explicit references to male anatomy and/or signaled participation in activities that require a male body. The most common ways of signaling possession of a heterosexual male body were masturbatory comments, jokes and images. Some tweets were the virtual version of a sly wink (“Big night for Kleenez [sic] and Jergens last night/this morning.”). But many MPs used unambiguous slang terms (e.g., “cumming,” or “jizzing” and “fapping”<sup>2</sup>) to describe their highly sexualized response to The Fappening. One MP stated, “I had a very busy weekend of fappin to J. Lawrence and Kate Uptons nudes.” The following comments were frequently re-tweeted: “#TheFappening all these photo leaks have caused me to leak something as well...my jism!” and, “Wat's fappening? A lot of ppl right now - omg I feel so bad for Jennifer Lawrence!! fap-fap-fap.” These latter tweets signal more than mere sexual desire, they naturalize the assumption that men are incapable of exercising sexual self-control – an assumption central to rape culture. Many tweets reified this assumption. For instance: “A healthy reminder to those closely monitoring #TheFappening: please stay hydrated, pervs”; “Day 2 of #TheFappening prepare your lotion and clear your schedules we don't know I [sic] who is next ; “RIP the hands of my fellow men”; and “We have now reached a new time era where no male hand is safe.”

These public proclamations of masturbation are examples of “compulsive heterosexuality” wherein men engage in public displays of heterosexuality, demonstrate their ability to “work their will upon the world around them,” and align their personas with dominant practices typically coded as masculine (Pascoe 2007, 86). As Pascoe explains, actions stemming from compulsive heterosexuality both “are and are not” about sex (2007, 85); at their core these

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<sup>2</sup> “Jizzing” and “Fapping” are male-only terms for orgasm and masturbation, respectively. To our knowledge, there is no widely-accepted female-specific term for masturbation. Thus, a male-body focus is central to the name of this online event.



acts are about power. In addition to textual displays of dominance, MPs frequently posted and re-tweeted masturbatory images or “memes.” Perhaps the most re-tweeted image during our period of analysis is a cartoon image of Glenn Quagmire, a character from the adult cartoon “Family Guy.”

[Figure 2 About Here]

In this still, Glenn stands on his front stoop, unshaven and wearing pajamas, his left arm huge and muscular, his right arm thin and limp. The implication is that Glenn has been copiously masturbating with the noticeably larger arm. Commentary accompanying this image was typically along the lines of “Me, after the Fappening.” Or, “Guys, after the Fappening.” Another commonly re-tweeted link takes the viewer to an animated meme. In this looping image, a shovel is seen scooping up a mass of sticky white substance from a bathroom floor. It is simply captioned, “The Fappening Aftermath.” Although intended to be a source of humor (more on that later), what these images actually portray are a world that is ruled by sexually voracious men who feel entitled to use the criminally acquired images of women for their sexual self-pleasure.

Although masculine practices are not confined to actors with male bodies, a penis may be viewed as a “semiotic asset” (Schwalbe 2014, 55). Further, “[b]odies are the vehicles through which we express gendered selves; they are also the matter through which social norms are made concrete” (Pascoe 2007, 12). Notably, Fappening participants blurred the lines between “front stage” and “backstage” behaviors (Goffman 1959) and demonstrated evolving conceptions of what it means to “own” a male body. Nineteenth and early twentieth century conceptualizations of masturbation as “self-abuse” linked the act to disease, insanity, and the degradation of the era’s “true” masculine ethos (Hall 1992). As Hall writes, “‘real men’ had sexual urges.... a true man was able to control these” (1992, 375). The pendulum has swung; signaling a *lack* of self-

control and *use of/control over* women's bodies is central to conveying a heterosexual, male body in cyberspace.

### **Sexualization of Women**

Related to, but distinct from the manhood act of signaling a heterosexual male body, is the process of sexualization. Sexualization is a multi-faceted process occurring when: an individual's value and worth come solely from his or her sexual appeal; one is objectified or regarded as an item for another's sexual use; an individual is held to a narrow standard that equates attractiveness with sexiness; or, sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon an individual (APA Task Force 2010). By reducing women to sexual objects, MPs implied sexual potency, differentiated themselves from the feminine, and signaled domination over women.

Sexualization was evident in tweets that signaled narrow standards for appearance, objectification, sexual appeal as victim's sole worth, imposition of sexuality and entitlement to women's bodies.

The underlying message of sexualization is: "You're not good enough" (Moloney and Pelehach 2014). Women are informed, early, often, and in myriad ways, that their appearance should mirror a particular, difficult-to-achieve set of cultural expectations. These unrealistic expectations are based in dominant racist, classist and ageist views (APA Task Force 2010). Despite the fact that many of The Fappening victims serve as the literal embodiment of our cultural standards of beauty (youthful, light-skinned, thin-yet-curvy, blonde, etc.), MPs on Twitter routinely critiqued their appearance. For instance, commenting on Oscar winner and frequent magazine cover girl Jennifer Lawrence, one MP scoffed: "There are literally dozens of porn stars who are hotter than Jennifer Lawrence. #TheFappening is overrated." Another MP wrote, referring to one of the world's top models, "Kate Upton has a weird ass body #lol

#TheFappening.” Tweeters were also quick to hone in on specific physical features that didn’t meet their standards. Wrote one: “Who’s this bitch with the saggy boobs who keeps popping up? Put them away!” Said another, “Kim Kardashian got those DINNER PLATES for nipples.” The manifest function of these tweets is to critique the appearance of these women, but the latent function harkens to the central purpose of manhood acts— enacting control and domination over women and women’s bodies (Johnson 2014).

In addition to imposing incredibly narrow aesthetic standards, sexualization strips women of their intellect, autonomy, and achievements. What’s left is a “thing” meant for others’ sexual use (APA Task Force 2010). This reductionist process was evident in many MP comments; high-achieving women were portrayed as objects to be consumed without consent. For instance, “I’d beat it so hard to a @DanicaPatrick sex tape. Why couldn’t she have been leaked on #TheFappening?” Other commenters reduced women even further, to just body parts, including “boobs” “booties” and “titties” (e.g., “So many boobs👁️👁️”). One enthusiastic pornography site hashtagged a string of objectifications in an attempt to lure clicks, “#Nude #Naked #Girls #Pictures #Pussy #Ass #Boobs #datass #Leaked #Celebrity #TheFappening”.

MPs also imposed their sexual desires on the Fappening victims; some depicted imagery wherein they had full access to these women’s bodies, and imagined themselves in intimate acts. For instance: “Everytime I see that Jennifer Lawrence all I can picture is a dirty sket covered in Jizz 😂.” MPs also underscored that the sole worth of these women came from their sexual appeal. One MP said: “If anything i hope #TheFappening shows pop stars and actresses how much more money and fame they could be getting by simply doing porn.” Another suggested: “Just own it, and be graceful. Ask us how we liked [the pictures], and then release more on your own.” Incredibly, one MP wrote: “Maybe if

these bitches would have shown their tits two weeks ago Robin Williams wouldn't have killed himself.” These tweets exemplify masculine social norms where men are “encouraged to bond around a common view of women as objects to be competed for, possessed and used” (Johnson 2014, 56).

In addition to implying that women are only good for sexual titillation and service, MPs demonstrated a sense of entitlement to these illegally gained images. MPs voiced threats (“the fapping better still be happening.”) demands (“Show us the photos we want to see.”; “LET THE FAPPENING COMMENCE”; “LET THE FAPPENING RESUME!!!!!!”), and an appetite for even more graphic material (“U have to go to the next level, the street wants sextapes” ; “It's horrible to say but... I hope there's more... and videos too”; “Keeping my fingers crossed for more #SelenaGomez and #ArianaGrande #TheFapping oh and #kateupton vids too”; ). The connection between these stolen, private, images and MPs appetite for pornography was made explicit by one Tweeter: “yeah, the fapping is great and all but the more I look at these pics of the women I've fantasized about the more I wanna watch real porn.” While this is not the place to engage in a thorough discussion of pornography, it is noteworthy that most, if not all of these commenters were mere clicks away from “real” porn. So, what was it about The Fapping victims that served to “break the Internet”?

We argue that these tweets reveal less about sexual desire, and more about the ability to exercise dominance over women’s bodies (Pascoe 2007, 85-6). In this case, MPs found it exciting or rewarding to figuratively dominate bodies of women who had achieved power in an otherwise male-dominated society. These accomplished women – actors, athletes, musicians – were reduced to objects, good only for sexual consumption. Further, MPs signaled domination by asserting that women’s worth lay solely in their sexual appeal while simultaneously imposing

impossible aesthetic standards. Finally, they demonstrated a deeply embedded sense of entitlement to the use of these stolen images for their sexual pleasure. As one participant rejoiced, "Not even apple's new IOS8 can save these celebrities from The Fappinging 🙌🙌".

### **Humor as A Tool Of Oppression**

A common theme throughout these data, and in other studies of masculine performance, is the presence of humor. Humor permeates male subjects' recollections of sexual encounters in Connell's (2005) foundational work. It is interwoven into the ethnographic accounts and interviews in Pascoe's (2007) study of sexuality in high school, and Kimmel's (2008) study of men negotiating young adulthood. Humor is a staple of masculine performance.

Humor typically acts in two ways to aid oppression: (1) as a smokescreen for oppressive discourse; and (2) as a neutralization technique for discordant self-evaluations. As to the former, humor can be a "very effective way of 'doing power' less explicitly" (Holmes 2000, 165). In the case of gendered interactions, humorous speech is often a vehicle for misogynistic messages establishing males as privileged and powerful in the heterosexual hierarchy (Kehily and Nayak 1997). Masculine comic displays are sometimes used to "blur the boundaries between humor and harassment" (Kehily and Nayak 1997, 81). Furthermore, humorous insults can be employed not only to affect the individual target of the discourse but serve the larger purpose of boundary maintenance and social control.

Fappinging-related humor had two primary aims: to claim a masculine self, and to trivialize the exploitation and oppression of women. In terms of claiming masculine status, humor was often used when signifying a male, heterosexual body. For instance, "The fappinging is a real hard time for us all" reifies the universality of the male body and makes an erection-related double-entendre. The tweet "that's one small step for a man, a giant leap for all of us

wankers! :-),” accomplishes multiple tasks. It establishes the tweeter as having a male body, one specifically used to masturbate to images of women. It also suggests the Tweeter is a member of the “in” group. Other tweets also underscore what a “gift” The Fappening was to the in-group (e.g. “The Fappening. Proof that god exists and he loves us”). Masculine performance was also linked to the trope of the sexually insatiable man. Even the President of the United States was jokingly presumed, via his male status, to be participating in The Fappening: “@BarackObama u making a statement about #TheFappening nude celeb photo leak or are you still jackin'?”

Humor is not used only as a cover for direct assaults. Humor also aids oppression when it serves as a neutralization tool that partially absolves an oppressor from conflicted feelings or sympathy for the oppression target. This is similar to the way that Goffman views humor and its relation to role distance (Coser 1966). Examples of this distancing are rife throughout these data. Most commenters expressed that they found the whole event “hilarious” (e.g., “Lol this whole fappening thing is mad fuckin funny”). Others managed to downplay the ways in which The Fappening was a violation. For instance: “The funniest comment I read on Jennifer Lawrence's leaked nudes is, ‘I bet her breasts taste like love & understanding.’” While this tweet is actually describing an incredibly invasive and sexually aggressive act, the MP pitches it as “funny.”

Other examples of humor use frequently invoked ambivalence. For instance, “On one hand, it's a huge violation of privacy. On the other... well, the other hand is busy.” And, “I feel bad for these women! (I keep looking) What kinda guy does this? (I keep looking) I feel creepy. #iKeepLooking #TheFappening.” Waffling between aggression and remorse allowed these MPs to ignore their heterosexist actions and create distance between themselves and the hacking victims. Sarcasm was also used to demonstrate lack of empathy (e.g., “Check out all these celebrities, thinking they're people. #TheFappening”).

In sum, many MPs used humor to claim masculine status, in turn oppressing women and reifying existing gendered inequalities. Humor in this context serves not just to reify power differentials between men and women, but to *trivialize* the negative, aggressive and degrading harms done *by men to women*. Although comic displays were primarily intended to gain group acceptance, they had a secondary purpose: to enable users to inhabit a liminal space between innocence and aggression. Within this liminal space, MPs were excused from having to take responsibility for their oppressive actions. They could claim every bully's favorite retort: "It was just a joke. Grow thicker skin." Thus, humor may be used as a technique to shift the responsibility back on women to be "good" objects, to submit to the male gaze and to keep any negative responses to themselves.

## DISCUSSION

Through the qualitative coding of Fappening-related tweets, we studied the creation and maintenance of a homosocial heterosexist virtual space. Within this space, masculine personas engaged in virtual manhood acts that signified their masculine selves, reified current gender hierarchies, and oppressed out-group members. In addition to the creation of a homosocial, heterosexist space, specific virtual manhood acts included the sexualization of women, signaling possession of a heterosexual, male body and using humor as a tool of oppression.

As previously stated, all manhood acts are, in essence, virtual (Shrock and Schwalbe 2009). Manhood acts are meant to create and support an abstract definition of self (or "front" to use Goffman's term) around which others organize their reactions and reflect appraisals congruent with a masculine persona (Pascoe 2007). This characteristic of manhood acts (and other social acts) lends support to the viewpoint that distinctions between real-world and virtual scenarios are blurred, overlapping, and possibly unhelpful. After all, even if these aggressively

masculine tweets come from people who would never act this way face-to-face, the enforcement of gender inequality remains impactful. In short, manhood acts performed online *or* face-to-face reproduce gender inequality.

Like all research, our study has noteworthy limitations. Our search terms (“fappening” and #thefappening) were the most appropriate choices to ensure that tweet text procured was directly relevant to The Fappening. Related search terms like “Jennifer Lawrence” and “hacking” also returned thousands of tweets, but we quickly realized that much of the text was un-related to The Fappening. Still, limiting our terms narrowed the breadth of tweets available for analysis and likely skewed our results toward Tweeters who were somewhat in favor of The Fappening. Conversely, this limitation may also be viewed as a strength, given that the term and use of hashtag were used to aid in carving out a homosocial, heterosexist space in which we could more readily observe these virtual manhood acts.

Despite its limitations, our research serves as a timely case study in the execution of modern manhood. Building on the interactionist perspective, we demonstrate how gender is both a performance and a master-status that belies the presence of a visual sex category (West and Zimmerman 1987; Ridgeway 2011). We introduce the concept of virtual manhood acts and identify four specific manhood acts used to claim membership in the heterosexist hierarchy and reproduce gendered inequality. These data demonstrate the ways in which homosocial space, collective action and gender identity intersect to reify power hierarchies. It also builds on sexualization literatures by specifically connecting masculine norms to the sexualization process. Further, it highlights major shifts in the conceptualization and utility of the male body. In addition, it builds on previous work that demonstrates the use of humor in constructing and reinforcing heterosexist hierarchies. In our study, humor served not only as a masculine signal



but as a tool to actively trivialize the oppression and exploitation of women. We also expand beyond the ethnographic studies that have thus far typified research on manhood acts. While ethnography is an important method that provides rich, nuanced insights, Twitter is a novel social space and largely untapped data source that may be used to capture reaction to social phenomenon occurring in real time.

Virtual manhood acts are noteworthy in their ability to overcome the absence of physical male characteristics while projecting a masculine persona. These virtual acts appear to be taken at face value by observers, despite a tacit understanding that the presence of visual cues may be contradictory to one's claim of status. However, the lack of information from physical characteristics, in this case study at least, leads to personas overtly making mention of ownership of male anatomy. Perhaps this is because suggesting possession of a heterosexual male penis, and thus the ability to "fap," enables the MP to quickly assert a masculine self, and in a way that does not easily lend itself to challenge.

Like in-person manhood acts, virtual manhood acts may be either performative (remind/assure/convince your audience you are a man) or compensatory (compensate for lower social status by laying claim to masculine power). The anonymity and disembodied nature of social media creates environments wherein individuals may lay claim to any identity imaginable. But choice of gendered expression – particularly a masculine self – does not appear to be randomly ordered. Manhood acts are linked not just with defining differences between men and women, but with establishing an innate and "natural" order wherein men are dominant and women are oppressed (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Although there is nothing "natural" or pre-ordered about the virtual spaces created on social media, the fact that so many Fapping commentators chose to claim heterosexual manhood status is a clear reflection on deeply

embedded societal gender dynamics. By documenting specific manhood acts carried out by MPs in virtual social space, we also strive to bridge the false cleavage between masculinity as a theoretical construct and the problematic – and very real - practices of men (Hearn 2004; McCarry 2007).

Virtual identities may be relatively nascent, but they appear to be here to stay. In a place where there is little or no imagery or where the (given off) image of the body can be controlled and manipulated to show any and all variations, it is possible to credibly perform (or “pass”) as any gender. As human interaction continues to migrate to virtual social spaces, the reproduction - or disruption - of inequality in these spaces must become a central research focus for social scientists. Future work should consider examination of other online spaces, and the gendered identities and hierarchies present. These gendered identities should be considered in context with intersectional factors of race, class, and age. While the technologically-facilitated mediums of social media are new, the sexist ideologies and social hierarchies reinforced by virtual manhood acts are ancient and deeply entrenched in society.

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Figure 1. Topsy Graphic of Search Term Related Trends

### Tweets per day: fapping OR #thefapping

August 31st — September 30th

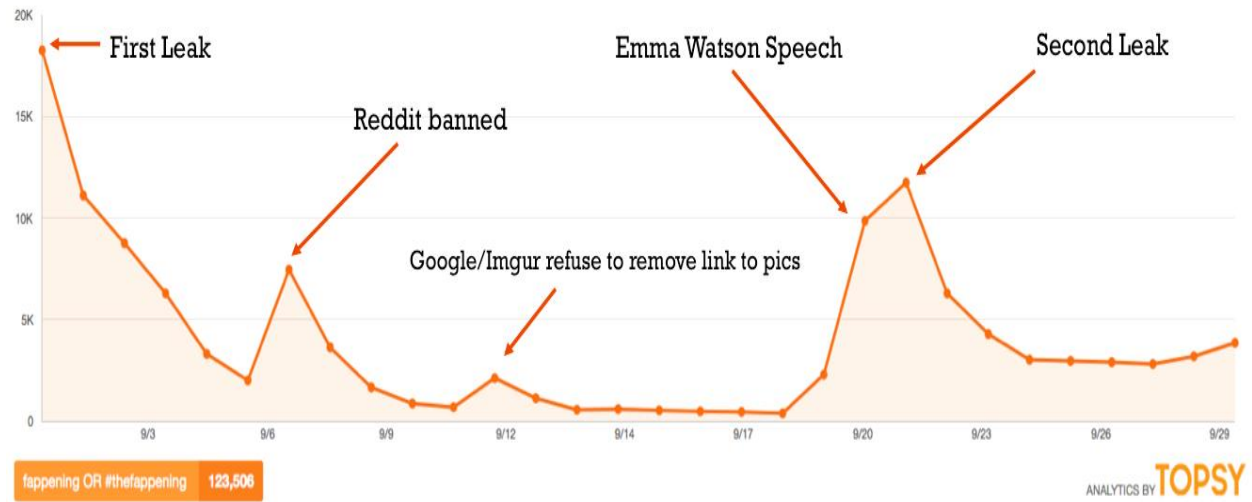


Figure 2. Signaling a Male, Heterosexual Body

